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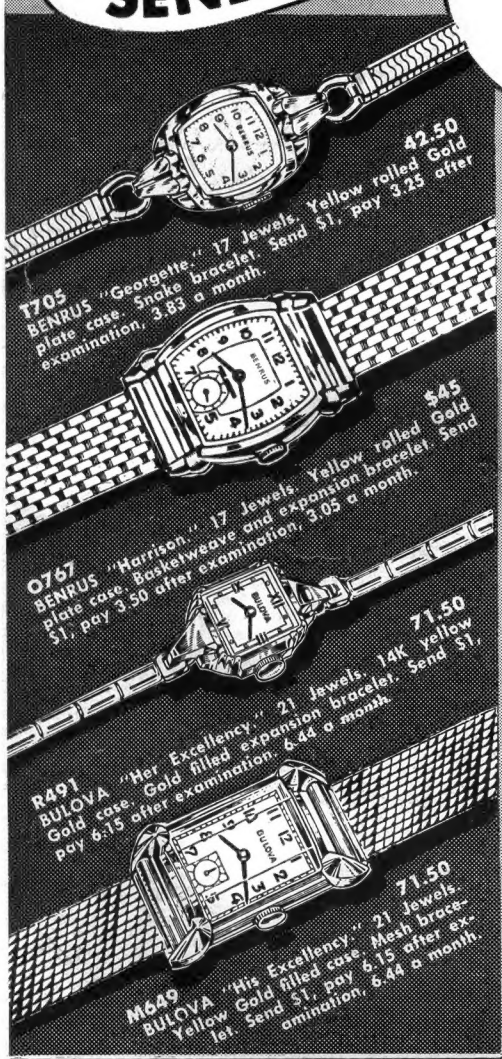

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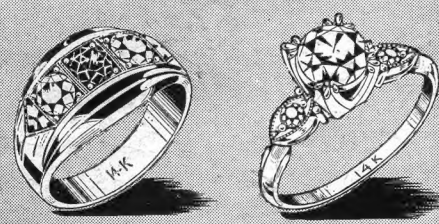

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Vol. 12 **Contents for March, 1949** **No. 4**

FOUR BIG NOVELS

DANGER—DEATH AHEAD.....**John MacDonald** **32**
Tomorrow's grave held the answer to yesterday's kill—and Mitch had the choice as to whose it would be—his own or the girl's he loved!

A BIER FOR BABY.....**William Campbell Gault** **54**
She was a lot of corpse, I was a lot of cop. We had our memories—and one other thing in common—too much killer!

MURDER MOON.....**C. P. Donnel, Jr.** **74**
Dim as death and tortured as a madman's mind, was the path that led to their final rendezvous. . . .

NO BODY—BUT ME.....**William Rough** **98**
All Elmer Allen added up to was one dead body. But it took the toughest dick this side of hell to keep him from multiplying!

SMASHING CRIME-ACTION NOVELETTE

CORPSE ABOUT TOWN.....**Robert C. Dennis** **10**
When Detective Maurer's gun shattered the riddles behind the devil's own looking glass, only two things proved to be real—death and Amy—and both were worth fighting for!

SHORT STORIES

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Life and death were hands on Kenneth's watch—racing to the hour when Murder must wake and go to work—and he and his corpse could sleep!

PUNK ON THE RUN.....**Johanas L. Bouma** **114**
A kid playing tough, a man playing dead—a cop walking his hardest beat as judge, jury—and killer!

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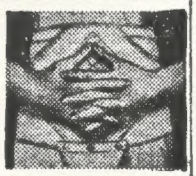

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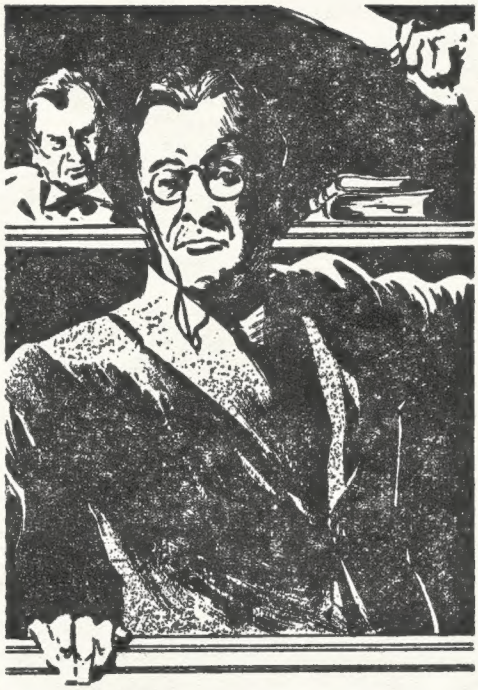

THE WITNESS CHAIR

THE only man ever to run for President of the United States from a prison cell was Eugene V. Debs. In 1920 the socialist nominee staged his campaign from the Federal Prison in Atlanta, where he was a guest, convicted of wartime sedition.

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(Continued on page 8)

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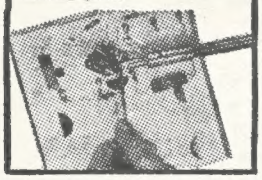

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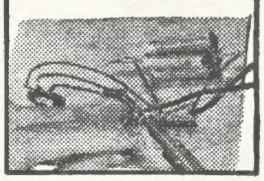

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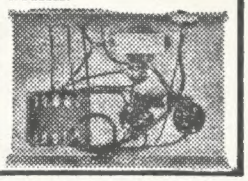

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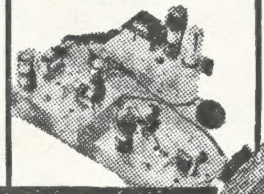

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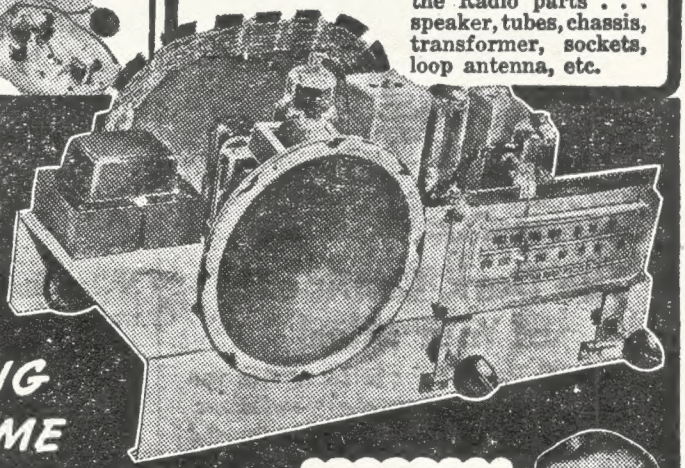

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***The* ROSICRUCIANS**

San Jose (AMORC) California

New Detective Magazine

(Continued from page 6)

'During the hours from 8 P.M. to 6 A.M., it shall not be unlawful for any person or persons to bathe on the beaches in the nude.'

The most successful of all criminals was an ancient Athenian named Aristophon. He was arrested and tried no less than ninety-five times—but each time won an acquittal!

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A statute of Portland, Maine, forbids anyone to tickle a girl under her chin with a feather duster.

A Portland, Oregon, thief snatched a woman's shopping bag and dashed off through the crowd. His loot: one dead dog.

In Mays Landing, New York, a citizen who stole kisses from the local lasses was convicted, sternly sentenced to kiss nobody but his wife for one year.

Operators of a Kansas City, Missouri, gambling hall shrewdly extended their building across the state line. When police got around to raiding the joint, they found the door locked. By the time they broke it down, all the gamblers were in the far side of the building, safely across the Kansas line.

A New Yorker who beat his wife was promptly jailed. On trial, he pointed to his homely mate, argued that he could not stand her looks. Judge Jonah J. Goldstein punished the chap by making him pay for beauty treatment for his wife.

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When Detective Maurer's gun shattered the riddles in that town behind the devil's own looking glass, only two things proved to be real—death and Amy—and both were worth fighting for!

CORPSE ABOUT TOWN

By Robert C. Dennis

CHAPTER ONE

A Corpse in the Corner Room

MAURER climbed stiffly down from the bus and, letting his suitcase drop to the spongy asphalt, fumbled for a cigaratte. From the meager shade of his hat brim his eyes considered the hot, somnolent street. He found nothing to distinguish it: a chain grocery, two pharmacies, several restaurants, a bank on the corner, a hotel. Everything standard. It could have been the main drag of a

He came into the room head first, a gun still in his hand. . . .

thousand different small towns. It happened to be Henderson, Indiana.

Behind Maurer the bus pulled away with a tired swoosh, taking its shadow with it, and leaving Maurer exposed to the hard, white sunlight. Recovering his suitcase, he crossed to the shady side of the street.

He paused to touch a light to his cigarette. His packet of paper matches carried advertising by a Chicago night spot. He put it quickly back into his pocket.

A brindle dog came hustling down the near-empty street, wagged hospitably at Maurer in passing, and kept on going. It hung in close to the building, detouring slightly for a striped barber pole, and wheeled around the corner out of sight.

Maurer let smoke trickle out of his nostrils. He rubbed a hand thoughtfully over his bristly jaw. Then, lifting his suitcase, he moved off in the direction of the hotel. The scaling gold lettering on the front window said: TOYNBEE HOUSE.

The lobby was just as the last old-time drummer had left it. Nothing had been added or taken away—not even the musty smell. Some day soon the little, white-haired man behind the desk would be taken away—for good. It wouldn't be long.

Maurer leaned an elbow on the desk. "Can I get a room?" He spoke without taking his cigarette from his lips.

"Yep. Sign here." The old man opened an ancient ledger and handed Maurer a pen. "You a salesman?"

"Real estate," Maurer said briefly.

"Oh—two-thirteen." He slapped a key on the desk. "Reckon you can carry that bag up yourself? I'm kinda rheumatic for climbin' stairs."

"I'll manage," Maurer said. "Does two-thirteen face the street?"

"Oh, you want a front room? Well, reckon you can take Two-ten.

"Okay." Maurer paused. "Give me the other key."

"That one'll do it." The man cackled. "It fits every room."

"That's very cozy," Maurer said coldly. "Just one big happy family. Does anybody ever get murdered in his sleep?"

The old man scowled. "You got any valuables, you can leave 'em here in the safe.

Maurer stared at the huge, black, old-fashioned safe set into its own small cove behind the desk. "That box? I could crack that with a knife and fork."

"You're a real smart-crackin' young feller, ain't you?" The thin, old mouth curled up over shrunken gums. "A big shot from the city, I betcha. Well, I can tell you somethin'—"

"Knock it off," Maurer said wearily. He took the key and his suitcase and walked away. He climbed the stairs to the second floor. Room 210 was at the end of the hall, a corner room. Maurer unlocked the door and went in.

It was big, but it seemed crowded. Maurer decided that the larger-than-life-sized bunches of grapes on the wallpaper did the trick. They were faded to a sickly purple, but they had once been lush. Thirty years ago. There was not much furniture. A small table, one chair, a dresser with a Gideon Bible, a brass-studded bed. There was a man lying on the bed.

"Sorry," Maurer said. "One of us is in the wrong room."

He took a backward step and looked up at the number over the door. It was 210. He came back into the room.

The man on the bed said nothing. His face was turned away from Maurer toward the opposite wall. Only the line of his jaw was visible.

A fly which had been walking along that jaw line moved languidly down over the cheek and out of sight. Maurer let his cigarette drop from his lips to the worn-out carpet. He put a foot on the butt and ground it flat. He stared for a long two minutes. Then the fly worked its way up

over the curve of the man's face. It was a big bluebottle fly.

Somewhere in the hotel a door slammed, sending hollow echoes scurrying along the halls. The fly soared off to the window and batted furiously against the pane. Outside, a heavy truck lumbered through the main drag of Henderson, Indiana. In the distance a dog began to bark. In room 210 of the Toynbee House only Maurer heard these sounds.

The man on the bed had died some hours before.

He was about thirty-five years old. His nose was short and round; his chin was square. Dark hair grew low on his forehead. His brown eyes were wide open, as if he were contemplating the leprous grapes on the wallpaper. The pallor on his face struck Maurer as unnatural, even for violent death. He had been shot in the chest, slightly below the left shoulder. A wad of blood-soaked cloth had slipped down from the wound.

Still staring at the body, Maurer fumbled a cigarette from his pocket. He brought out the packet of paper matches advertising a Chicago night club. Without looking at it he returned it to his pocket and took a wooden match from the dresser top. Then, smoke trickling from his nostrils, he picked up his suitcase and left room 210.

He walked to the extreme end of the hall, the opposite corner room. With his master key he unlocked the door and looked in. It appeared untenanted. He entered and placed his suitcase on the lone chair. Then he crossed to the window.

With his hat shoved back from his forehead he considered the street below. His eyes took in the striped barber pole, and he automatically rubbed a hand over his jaw. Presently he broke off his study of the street and left the room. He locked the door behind him and went downstairs.

The little old man had deserted his post. The lobby was empty. Maurer walked behind the desk, found an unused envelope. Squinting past the smoke from his cigarette he scribbled a note with the sputtering pen:

> Moved into room 200. Need towels.
> Gone to barber shop. Dead man in 210.

He signed it and left it propped against the inkwell on the desk.

A RED-HEADED, freckled-faced boy was getting a crew cut. No one else was waiting. Maurer sat down. The barber gave him a pleasant, empty smile.

"Finished in two minutes."

"No hurry," Maurer said. "I'll be around for a while."

"Thought you were a stranger. Traveling man, I suppose? What do you sell?"

"I'm not selling," Maurer said. "I'm buying."

He tilted back his chair, tipped his hat down on his eyebrows. He could just see the barber from under the hat brim. He said, "I'm a real estate man. Thought I might run into some property values around here."

"Pretty well bought up," the barber said.

"Well," Maurer said carelessly, "I'm looking for something special. Not the usual sort of real estate. Property values, so to speak."

The barber let that ride. He dusted the red-headed boy off, cranked the chair down. The boy rubbed his shorn skull and grinned. He swaggered out. The barber looked at Maurer briefly.

Maurer got into the chair. He asked, "Have you lived in Henderson a long time?"

"Yeah," the barber said. "A long time. But I wouldn't know about any special property values."

Maurer stared at the barber's good-looking, emotionless face. "There's a short man, about thirty-five, dark hair,

brown eyes, pug-faced. Who'd he be?"

"Don't place him," the barber said. "Doesn't sound like anybody in town."

"He's in town," Maurer said. His voice was faintly ironic. "I thought barbers in small towns knew everybody."

"It isn't required," the barber said. "Sorry I can't help."

"Doesn't matter," Maurer said. But it did. He couldn't figure the dead man in 210. It might be extraneous, but even so it could be inconvenient. "Who's the law in this town?"

"Eb Dietz is chief of police." The barber put a scalding towel on Maurer's face. Maurer gripped the arms of the chair and didn't move a muscle. The towel cooled in time and presently went away. "Joe Versen is Dietz's deputy."

Maurer waited, but the barber had said his piece. A noisy clock filled the silence until Maurer's face was scraped clean. Then the barber silently adjusted the chair to an upright position. Maurer said, "You're going to get kicked out of the barber's union. You're supposed to bore the customers."

A muscle jumped in the barber's sallow, good-looking face. He said with stiff lips, "I guess I'm just a failure."

Maurer got out of the chair. "Where's there a good place to eat?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Where do you eat?"

"The Elite Cafe."

Maurer was knotting his tie in front of the mirror. He switched his gaze to the barber's reflection. "But you wouldn't recommend it."

The barber breathed through his mouth. He didn't say anything.

A man in overalls came in and said, "Am I next, Earl?"

The barber nodded. He took Maurer's money, made change from a drawer. When he turned around again, there was a fixed smile on his face. "You can get a good meal in the Elite. Tell the waitress, the blonde one, I sent you. She'll see that you get plenty to eat."

"Thanks," Maurer said. He put a cigarette between his lips. He tried to talk without jiggling it. "Who'll I tell her sent me?"

"The barber."

"Uh-huh," Maurer said. "You're the only one in town?"

"The name is Earl Beck, mister. Is that what you wanted to know?"

"That's it."

"You could have saved time if you'd just asked me."

"Yeah," Maurer agreed, "so I could have."

"And if you've got a beef, come out with that, too. I don't know what's eating on you, mister, but you've needled me ever since you came in here. I don't know what your reason is—maybe you're a pal of Joe Versen's." He was white around the corners of his mouth. "If that's it, tell him I'll see Amy till she says different. If Versen wants to leave his badge off he can come in and do his own talking."

"If he's the law, I'll probably be seeing him," Maurer said. "I'll tell him."

The blonde waitress was leaning on the counter, talking to a big, stolid-faced man. She had a country girl's complexion and perfect teeth. Her eyes were slightly vacuous, but she was pretty. She smiled automatically at Maurer, brought the coffee he ordered and went back to the man.

Maurer considered the man briefly and decided on the evidence that he was a farmer. There was a very faint scent of the barnyard in the air. Maurer drank his coffee, left a dime on the counter and went back to the hotel.

The Toynbee House echoed with the slamming of doors and heavy, hurrying footsteps, but they must have been on the floor above or in the back halls. There was no one in sight as Maurer climbed the stairs. He observed in passing that his note was gone from the desk.

He let himsenf into room 200. His suitcase was still on the chair, but it had been opened and thoroughly searched. Nothing seemed to have been taken.

Maurer took off his hat and coat and tie. He stretched out on the bed and smoked a cigarette. He was halfway through a second one, when someone knocked on the door. Maurer went over and opened it a narrow two feet.

A tall, wide-shouldered man in faded sun-tans crowded casually into the room. He wore no hat and his hair was red-gold and curly. There was a big cleft in his chin, but it did nothing to soften the hard, handsome cast of his face. Maurer looked at him, shrugged, and walked over to stare out the window.

Earl Beck was standing in the doorway of his barber shop.

THE tall man said casually, "You're James Maurer."

Maurer didn't turn around. "That's what it said on the register downstairs, didn't it?"

"Yeah," the man admitted. "You got anything else that says so?"

"You got any authority to ask that?" Maurer swung away from the window, his eyes suddenly hot. "Or for breaking into my room and searching my bag?"

"You want to make a complaint?" the man asked softly. "Just tell me all about it. I'm Joe Versen, the law in this man's town."

"I guess that's different." Maurer started fumbling for a cigarette. "So you found the stiff in two-ten."

Versen nodded curtly. "How about that identification, fella?"

Maurer shrugged and reached for his coat. He removed his billfold and tossed it to the deputy. Versen caught it easily in a hand big enough to palm a grapefruit. He flipped it open and studied the driver's license under the celluloid window.

"From Chicago," he said. "Very interesting." Then, deliberately, he looked into the bill compartment. "You're not carrying much money, Maurer."

Maurer's face was hard with anger. "I'm not buying anything. Or anybody."

Versen shrugged and handed the billfold back. "Don't you know you're supposed to report a murder?"

"I left a note. I didn't know it was murder. He might have been cleaning his gun."

"That's a possibility." Versen picked up Maurer's package of cigarettes from the dresser top, helped himself to one. "What do you know about the guy in two-ten?"

"Well," Maurer said, "he's dead."

Versen smiled, almost pleasantly. "Don't be witty, Maurer. It'll only make you unpopular with me. And that, I might tell you, is mighty poor policy. Now, what do you know about the dead man?"

"Not a damn thing," Maurer snapped. "I just got into town. I never saw him before. . . . Who was he?"

"His name was Gordon Snyder." Versen's voice was chilly. He turned the chair around, sat on it backwards. "That ought to make it my turn to ask a question."

"Help yourself," Maurer said.

"What are you doing in Henderson? I understand you claim to be a real estate man."

Maurer waved that aside. "I'm vacationing now. I thought Henderson would be a good place for a rest."

Versen grinned faintly. "What do you think now?"

"It's not so restful. Does that cover everything?"

"No," Versen snapped. "Not by a hell of a lot. I'd like to know more about you."

"Why? Snyder was dead before I got off the bus."

"I know that, Maurer. I checked on you as far as Snyder is concerned."

Maurer said thinly, "Is there anything

else that you might like to pin on me?"

"I might. Some trucks have been hijacked recently just down the highway from here. Would you know anything about that?"

"No," Maurer said, "and I haven't been stealing any atom bomb secrets either. Not recently."

Versen grinned again, without much humor. He got up and started toward the door.

"I suppose I'll have to stay in town for the inquest."

"That's right," Versen said. He paused at the door. "If you have to leave, give me your address."

Maurer nodded. "How come old Father Time down at the desk didn't know Snyder was in two-ten?"

"He never gets upstairs," Versen said. "Haven't found out yet why the maid didn't know. But I will." Versen opened the door, then turned back. "My turn again. If you're a stranger here, how come you were riding Earl Beck so hard?"

"Did Beck complain?"

"No," Versen admitted. "I heard about it from another customer. Did you know Beck somewhere?"

"Never saw him before in my life," Maurer said. "I just didn't like him."

Versen said slowly, "You're the damnedest guy. You get sore faster about nothing than anybody I ever met."

Maurer was again staring out of the window. Earl Beck had gone back inside his shop. "I know, I know. I'm just misunderstood. Come to think of it, Beck doesn't like you either."

"He's got coffee nerves." Versen was grinning. "He'd like to cut me out with my girl, but he can't quite make it. He drinks coffee all day, just so he can sit and gaze at her."

"The little blonde in the Elite? She sold me a cup of coffee, too."

"Don't let it keep you awake nights," Versen advised. He went out, slamming the door heartily behind him. The echoes chased each other down the dim and dusty corridors.

Maurer sat by his window, smoking, until shadows grew in the street below. A light had been burning for some time in Earl Beck's barber shop, but no customers had gone in. The stores closed and people filled the street. Then they dwindled away. Earl Beck wasn't one of them. The brindle dog made another trip to some mysterious destination around the corner. The light still burned in the barber shop.

Presently Maurer put his tie and coat on, hesitated, and then opened his suitcase. He fumbled around until he found an automatic. He put it in his hip pocket and went out.

He didn't bother locking his door.

CHAPTER TWO

Get Out of Town

DOWN in the lobby, the old man was poring near-sightedly over a newspaper spread out on his desk. He never raised his head when Maurer dropped the key in front of him.

"Stick it in your safe," Maurer said coldly. "And where are my towels?"

The old man poked the key aside with a quivering finger and pretended to read the column beneath it. Maurer stood and glared. Finally the old man muttered, "Bertha'll be up after supper."

"Tell her if she finds me dead in my bed not to leave them." Maurer stalked outside. He decided that crack hadn't been funny. It could happen.

He walked down the street to the Elite Cafe. Amy, the blonde waitress, was still talking to the big, blank-faced farmer. She left him to fill a glass with water for Maurer.

"Hello," she said. "What'll it be this time?"

"I don't know," Maurer said, studying

the menu. The big farmer got up and left the cafe as if he'd just remembered something important. Maurer looked over the top of the menu at the girl. "Friend of yours?"

She laughed without mirth. "Friend of a friend. He goes steady with Bertha Mack. She's the maid at the Toynbee House."

"You're Amy, aren't you?"

"Yes, Amy Cooke." She frowned. "I don't remember seeing you in here before today."

"No," Mauer said. "Earl Beck sent me over."

"Oh," she said. "Earl."

"I'd like to talk to you about Earl." Maurer's voice was pitched low. "What time do you get off here?"

"Not till seven-thirty. If you wait, I could see you then."

"I'm in the Toynbee House," Maurer told her. "Room two-hundred. Come up as soon as you're off."

She flushed. "I couldn't go to the hotel."

"Oh, hell," Maurer muttered. "Well, name a place."

"How about Earl's shop? My boss owns that building and he has the key now."

Maurer shook his head. "Earl might see us."

"But he's gone," Amy said. "I thought you knew that!"

"Gone? He's over in his shop now."

She shook her blonde head. "No, he isn't. He left an hour ago. Sold all his stock to Ike—the other barber in town. And his landlady said he'd packed his clothes and driven away."

Maurer was staring at her incredulously. Now he swore in complete disgust. The light in Beck's shop had fooled him into thinking Beck was still there. *An hour's start!* he thought.

"What is it?" Amy pleaded. "What's happening around here? Why did Earl run away? They say there was a man murdered in the Toynbee House. Earl didn't have anything to do with that, did he? You're a friend of his, you must know."

"I don't know," Maurer said. "Beck didn't mean anything to you, did he?"

"He was—we were friends."

"But not like Joe Versen?"

"Leave my love life out of it," she flared. "I've gone out with both Earl and Joe, that's all. Please tell me where Earl's gone."

"I don't know." Maurer asked, "How long have you known him?"

"Since he came to town. About six months ago. I don't know where he came from."

Maurer considered while he fumbled for a cigarette. Then he said flatly, "He came from Chicago. His name isn't Beck. He's an ex-con. He came here shortly after he got out of jail. That's where he learned to be a barber—at Joliet."

Amy's face had gone slack. Her eyes were clouded.

"Things were too hot for him in Chicago. So he disappeared and changed his name." Maurer's mouth was bitter. "He didn't leave any forwarding address that time either."

"Are—are you a policeman?"

"Private detective." Maurer got his cigarette lit. He used the paper matches from the Chicago night club. It didn't matter now. "His girl friend hired me to find him. I put a lot of time and effort into tracking him down."

Amy said, as if the words hurt, "His girl friend?"

"A girl named Dell Austin." Maurer watched her intently. "Singer in a Chicago hot spot. She waited for Beck to get sprung, then he walked out on her. She wanted him back, I'd never know why."

"Is she pretty?" Amy polished the counter without knowing it. The cafe began to fill up with early diners. The other waitress glared in Amy's direction.

"Yes, she's pretty," Maurer said softly. Some of the hard, cynical light went out of his dark eyes. "Much too pretty for Earl Beck. But there's more than that. She waited for him,didn't she? Three years. That's a long time in any woman's life. And what did he give her for all that time?"

"Maybe he hadn't wanted her to wait," Amy twisted the corner of her handkerchief. "Maybe he was tired of her. He might have wanted a different kind of a girl."

Maurer shrugged. His eyes were brooding again.

"You—liked her, didn't you?" Amy said suddenly.

"I only met her twice," Maurer said. "I hardly knew her."

"Yes, you liked her," Amy said wisely. "Just like I liked Earl. I liked him a lot. Because I knew he was in trouble—I could tell. He never said anything, though. Maybe I'd have gone steady with him, except he wanted to stay in Henderson. I couldn't see that—I want to go to the city and live." She blinked hard several times. "What—why was he in jail?"

Maurer shrugged. "What difference does it make?"

"None, I guess. I'll never see him again."

The big farmer came back in and sat down in the same seat, around the curve of the counter. Maurer consulted the menu again. But his appetite was gone.

"I'll eat whatever Earl Beck usually had."

The farmer grunted loudly. Maurer lowered the menu and stared at him. The farmer glowered back.

Maurer smiled at Amy. They had something in common now. "Hot beef sandwich, I guess."

"Earl ordered that sometimes," she said in a low voice.

The farmer grunted again. The cafe was suddenly very quiet. Maurer laid the menu aside and stared fixedly at him.

"Did you say something, friend?" he asked politely.

"Who, me? Naw, I was just thinking to myself." The farmer leaned forward and looked at Maurer belligerently. "You a friend of Beck's?"

"I'm a stranger in town," Maurer said.

"So's Beck. Does that make you a friend of his?"

"A hot beef sandwich," Maurer told the waitress. "And coffee."

"Earlie Beck stinks," the farmer stated. He seemed slightly drunk. "If he put on all the sweet smelling tonic he's got in that barber shop, he'd still stink!"

"He must've been in here lately," Maurer said, pleasantly. "The place smells like a barnyard."

THERE was a long, tight silence. The farmer got slowly to his feet and came around the bend of the counter. Amy, the waitress, said, "You had that coming, Alf."

Somebody across the room said, "Sit down, Alf."

Alf towered over Maurer. "Stand up," he said grimly.

Maurer looked back over his shoulder and up at the farmer. He was a big man; huge, knotty hands, heavy wrists, muscle-bound arms. Maurer said agreeably, "So Earl Beck stinks."

"And you're a friend of his!"

Maurer could tell what was coming. Far back in his mind, he sensed the pattern of events that was taking form. And this was part of it. This big, drunken farmer was only playing out his own designated role in something larger and infinitely more dangerous. Maurer's understanding was simply part of his training and experience. He said deliberately, "Take a walk for yourself, farmer."

The farmer laid a big paw on his shoulder. Maurer twitched out from under, came off the opposite side of his chair and

was standing up in one smooth, explosive motion. The big man had already started a haymaker that would have floored a steer. But it was slow and ponderous. Maurer stepped inside and ripped a left and right into his mid-section. The punches were short, but Maurer's square shoulders were behind each blow, and his legs were driving.

Alf's mouth popped open. His face turned a pale green. He went backwards two careful steps, not staggering. He didn't quite double over, but his eyes were sick and full of something like panic. He turned and walked stiffly, like a dignified drunk, to the nearest table and sat down. Then he retched violently.

A man and woman at a nearby table left their dinner and went hastily outside. Maurer looked at Amy. His eyes were black with rage, but he worked up a smile.

"Hot beef sandwich, remember?"

He was finishing a piece of apple pie when Joe Versen moved into the next seat. Versen's big, handsome face was set. He said, "Maurer, you've been trouble ever since you hit town. We don't hold for brawling here."

"You ought to tell people," Maurer said. "There's a big farmer who hasn't heard."

"I don't care what it was all about," Versen retorted. "I don't care who started it or who got hurt. I've had complaints and I'm going to take action."

"Is Alf going to sue me?"

"I wonder how witty you'd be if I let Alf and his brother alone to do what they'll be planning to do." Versen leaned back and stared at Maurer. "I think you're a good man, Maurer, but the Hanker brothers would simply kick your brains out—literally. I can't have that."

"The other one must be tough. I cut my eyeteeth on the likes of Alf."

"There's two more busses through here," Versen said between his teeth. "At seven and eight-fifteen. One in each direction. We don't want to make it tough on you, Maurer. Take either one. Go either direction. But go! That's all. Just go."

"And if I don't?"

"Then I'll have to jug you." Versen smiled suddenly. "For vagrancy. You've got no funds—no visible means of support."

"I've got a few dollars," Maurer reminded him.

"You won't have after you've paid a fine for disturbing the peace, and assault and battery."

"You wouldn't think of loading the dice, would you?"

Versen stood up. "Maintaining law and order in this town is my responsibility, Maurer. If I have to be a little rough with the transients to do it, that's all right, too. Drag out of here, but fast."

Maurer glanced at his watch. He had fifteen minutes to catch the first bus. "How are you making out with your investigation on the dead man in two-ten?"

Versen leaned his large hands on the back of the chair. "Dietz, that's my chief, wants to buy your theory. He says Snyder was cleaning a gun. Nuts! He was murdered. I think I'll soon know who did it."

"Why was he in the hotel?" Maurer asked. "Didn't he have a home?"

"You ask more damned questions than any guy I ever met!" Versen snapped. "Don't miss your bus."

He strode outside, big, handsome, and authoritative.

Presently Maurer paid his check and went back to the Toynbee House. The place was quiet and dim now. Maurer saw no one on his way upstairs to his room.

He repacked his bag without turning on the light. It took only a few minutes. Then he moved the chair near the window and sat down to wait.

He knew something was going to break. The feeling was based on nothing more

solid than a hunch born of his experience. But he didn't think Earl Beck could have tied up all the loose ends of his existence in Henderson in so short a time. He might be depending on Maurer to accept his disappearance as final, and tomorrow, after Maurer had gone, he'd return to complete all unfinished business.

Maurer bought that, and then grunted sardonically. Beck hadn't driven far, okay, but he'd gone far enough to be safe till Maurer left town. And Maurer would leave. Versen would see to that—even if the bus would take him to California.

Maurer swore explosively. He couldn't stay cooped up here in this hot and airless room. And yet in the cloudy depth of his half-conceived hunch, he knew that the Toynbee House was the focal point. He didn't know why, or how long he might have to wait.

So he sat by the window, with a trained and wonderful patience, waiting for something he didn't know to happen. He wasn't even sure he'd recognize it when it came. He smoked until his mouth tasted brassy and his head ached.

The hotel was deadly still, except for rats in the wainscoting. The seven o'clock bus trundled down the main street, waited ten minutes, and went on. It was the Chicago bus. Maurer wondered if he was just being stubborn.

EVERYBODY in town passed down the street at least once. A gang of small boys, all bearing evidence of Earl Beck's trade in their close-cropped heads, traipsed by, arguing loudly. The same brindle dog, or his twin, squatted in the entry of a building across the street, like a laborer taking his ease in the cool of the evening, after a hard day's work. A huge transport truck rolled down the street and parked in front of the Elite Cafe. The eight-fifteen bus hove into sight, giving the street a choked-up appearance.

A key clattered in the door. Maurer tensed with his hand behind him, near his hip pocket. A girl came in and snapped on the wall light switch. She had towels folded over her arm.

"I'm Bertha, the maid," she said, sullenly. She was a sturdy, thick-legged girl, with stringy hair and heavy features. "I brought your towels."

She flung them on the bed.

"I hope it wasn't too much trouble," Maurer said coldly.

She didn't asnwer. She went out, slamming the door.

Maurer glanced out the window again. The truck was still parked across the street. The eight-fifteen was maneuvering past it. Maurer came suddenly to his feet. At the door, he remembered his suitcase, but didn't go back for it.

Down in the shadows of the building, near the truck, Maurer watched the driver come along the street, chewing a toothpick. He wore a leather jacket, though the day's heat still lingered. He stood indecisively with one foot on the high running board.

Maurer sidled over to him, "How's for a ride, friend?"

The driver barely glanced at him. "Couldn't do it. Company rules."

"I missed the last bus," Maurer said. "And the deputy told me to get out of town."

The driver looked at him then. He nodded briefly. "Okay. Let's go."

CHAPTER THREE

The Farm of Death

THE truck got under way easily. It wasn't carrying much of a load. They rolled westward, past the last straggling buildings lining Henderson's main street, and into the sudden darkness beyond the town's limits. The driver hunched over the wheel, his eyes intent on the road ahead. He didn't speak.

Three or four miles slipped by. Maurer leaned back in his corner and considered his hunch. He was headed for Earl Beck now—or California.

A light winked in the darkness, flashing a signal to the truck. Maurer's eyes shifted swiftly to the driver's face. He said, "Hijackers?"

The driver chuckled humorlessly. He was decreasing the truck's speed and in an instant Maurer saw why. A lane right-angled off the highway, and the truck was veering off into it. And then somebody leaped onto the running board.

"Straight ahead," he snapped. "Hurry it up."

In the illumination drifting back from the headlights, Maurer looked into the man's face. Simultaneously they recognized each other, and Alf Hanker swore in startled rage.

Maurer sensed the driver's alarm, but he didn't have time to turn. Almost without consciously thinking of it, he jammed down the door handle, threw his weight against that of Alf Hanker's.

Alf shouted as he went backwards off the running board. Maurer's own momentum pulled him on out, too. He doubled up, fighting to relax before he hit the ground. He landed on his shoulder, rolled and somersaulted into the bushes lining the lane. The truck, losing speed, was already fifty yards ahead.

In the other direction, Alf Hanker was shouting furious profanity into the night air. Maurer knew from the noise he made that he'd not been disabled. Crouching low to take advantage of the bushes, Maurer ran straight ahead—toward the farm he knew must be down the lane. Alf was between him and the highway and there was only open pasturage to Maurer's right. The truck was backing up. It and Maurer passed each other and both kept going.

The ruse succeeded only briefly. Long before Maurer sighted the farm buildings, the truck had reversed its course again, and was rushing down the lane behind him. The spotlight stabbed out at Maurer's back just as he left the shelter of the bushes and sprinted for the dark bulk of a barn.

A gun cracked, not too far away. Maurer winced and ducked, but kept running, zigzagging out of the beam of the light. A second shot, more remote and wild, and Maurer turned on the speed for the last fifty feet. Then something low and rounded—something Maurer never did identify quite—loomed in front of him. He felt the force of the collision against his shins

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and he went headlong, landing face down on the manure-smelling ground, not relaxed this time because he'd been unprepared.

He felt the weight of his gun leave his hip pocket as it took off through the air, too. Stunned and confused, he flung himself around, on his knees now, and saw Alf Hanker and someone else—the driver, undoubtedly—leave the truck and come racing toward him, silhouetted against the truck's headlights, but distorted and unreal to his spinning brain. He pawed the ground, fumbling in the darkness for his gun. His hands found only the wet, warm earth.

He tried to focus his mind to calculate the direction the gun must have gone. He couldn't do it, and his hands went frantic on him. His mind was in a turmoil of frustration, all the frightful nightmares of a lifetime suddenly turned real. Alf Hanker, less than forty feet away by now, drew a bead and snapped a running shot at him.

And then, his breath sobbing out of his lungs, Maurer's frenzied fingers must have found the gun, for somehow its cool, smooth form was in his hands and, with the world still jumbled and spinning, he tried to squeeze the trigger. Nothing happened, and in the wasted second before he remembered to release the safety catch, Alf Hanker stormed in on him, as big as the truck, and so close the headlights behind him were blotted out.

Then Maurer fired—and missed. He felt the gun jump in his hand, and the explosion was like a hand grenade gone off in his face, yet he knew his shot had gone wild. But Alf Hanker bellowed in consternation, wheeled aside and was gone behind the corner of an outbuilding.

Maurer, still crouched, ran stumbling and hopping on his good leg to the barn he'd been headed for. Pain was swooping up from his battered shin and he thought, briefly, that he'd broken a bone.

Alf was still bellowing and making the night hideous. From the direction of the house, lighted up now, someone—Earl Beck from the sound—was bawling questions and instructions. The trucker had gone back to his machine to get a gun, and now he blotted out all human sound with a fusillade that knocked splinters from the corner of the barn near Maurer's face.

Propped against the wall, his one leg paralyzed, Maurer leaned around and threw a shot in return. The panic it caused was all out of proportion to its actual effect. The volume of shooting doubled and Maurer, his mind hardly any clearer, thought the echoes of previous shots were just coming back. Then a man screamed, a high-pitched scream of anguish, and Maurer wondered stupidly if he'd fired again, without realizing it.

He eased himself around into the open. Bullets no longer hit the corner of the building. He braced himself and pumped three rapid fire shots toward the house. In the kaleidoscopic scene of lights and running men and flashes of guns, Maurer sensed that reinforcements had arrived from somewhere—somehow—

He had one more shot left, he thought. He picked out a target this time, and, praying it was Earl Beck, sighted carefully. And then, just as he squeezed the trigger, the whole scene erupted in one vast display of fireworks. The earth shook beneath his feet, and the barn fell away from him, so that his weight momentarily was on his injured leg, and that gave way without hesitation.

As he went down, he realized the fireworks were inside his head, and he, not the earth, was rocking. He said, aloud, with the most utter amazement he'd ever known, "I've been shot in the head!"

THE fat, bald man tried to explain it all, but to Maurer it didn't seem important. The bullet had been a ricochet, with most of the force spent before

it danced along the side of Maurer's skull. He was going to be all right, once the headache let up. His leg wasn't really broken either, the man assured him.

The fat man was Eb Dietz. The law in Henderson, Indiana—he and Joe Versen. It was Joe who had sprung the trap on the Hankers tonight. Joe was still out there, running down the last one, that renegade barber, that Earl Beck. Maurer had done some mighty fine shooting there. Too bad he hadn't got the trucker. No, he got away, too, in the truck. All the loot was still in the Hankers' barn, though.

Maurer didn't care. He was depressed as he had never been before. Eb Dietz drove back toward Henderson. He was a little hurt that Maurer hadn't seen fit to consult him. Always cooperated with private agencies. So did Joe. Great deputy, Joe, Dietz said enthusiastically. Maurer would like Joe.

"I've met Joe," Maurer said, hoarsely. He got out in front of the Toynbee House. It was very late; the street was deserted and dark.

He limped painfully into the hotel. He got one of the keys off the rack—they were all the same—and pulled himself up the stairs. There was a light on in his room. Maurer didn't realize that until he'd opened the door.

Amy Cooke was sitting stiffly on the edge of the lone chair. "I've been waiting," she said in a very little voice. "I thought you were gone—but I waited. In case—you came back. . . . "

"Sure," Maurer said, in his hoarse, painful voice. He fumbled in his suitcase and found a reload for his gun.

"I thought you might know something about Earl," she said, still trying to justify things. She wasn't the kind that went to men's hotel rooms.

Maurer eased himself down on the bed. "Listen," he said, "I didn't tell you everything today. I didn't come here to find Beck for his girl. It was something else. But both things seemed to tie up. Do you understand?"

"No." She shook her head.

"It was a coincidence," he explained carefully. "One of those things that happen sometimes. The outfit I work for was trying to get a line on a hijacking gang operating on the highway between here and Chicago. The gang pulled their jobs in different places, so our boys couldn't pin it down, couldn't get started. Then Dell Austin—she's the singer—came in. That was the coincidence, see?"

"Yes," Amy said. But, plainly, she didn't really see.

"A gang," he said with patience, "working out of one of these small towns. Then Dell Austin wanted to find her boy friend and I tracked him here. An ex-con. A strong-armed boy. That was it, everything fitted. Now do you understand?"

"You mean Earl was hijacking those trucks?"

Maurer just looked at her. The rats in the wainscoting were holding a relay race. The hotel was full of the little sounds that were never there in daylight. Someone stole quietly along the hall outside the door. "I came here to try to recover the loot. Beck wouldn't talk business with me."

"I don't believe it," Amy said. "Not Earl."

"Alf and Marvin Hanker were hiding the stuff on their farm. This guy Gordon Snyder was in on it, too. I don't know just how, maybe he fingered the jobs. He stopped a bullet. They parked him right here—in two-ten. I don't know why they didn't keep him on the farm."

"Yes," Amy said. "But not Earl—"

"They didn't take care of him. They let him die." Maurer shifted his throbbing leg. "I don't know the why of that, either. They sneaked him in here—Bertha probably helped—and then they let him die. Maybe he was a weak sister, maybe somebody wanted to cut down the number of shares. I don't know. I stumbled on

him, by accident, and that was too bad."

The footsteps outside in the hall were gone now.

"They were selling the loot to a Chicago fence. A truck came tonight to pick up a load." He thought most of this was going over her head, but it had to be said. "I rode the truck to the Hankers' farm. That was the driver's boner. There was a lot of shooting. The Hankers were killed, both of them. The fence's man got away. So did—"

"Earl?" Amy said. "He got away? He's gone—for good?"

Maurer didn't answer. He was watching the door knob turn silently. The door eased open, an inch at a time.

At exactly five inches, Maurer shot through the opening.

Amy screamed. The door was motionless for a moment, then it slammed open, as the man's weight collapsed against it.

He came into the room, head first, a gun still in his hand. He landed on his hands and knees, his head too heavy for his neck.

"Joe," Amy screamed. "That's Joe."

"Maurer," Versen whispered. "You're the damnedest guy. You blow off faster than any . . . man I ever . . . met. . . ."

"The big brain," Maurer said. He looked at the man lying on his face. "He might have gone good in Chicago. He was going to take you there, wasn't he? You wanted to go to the city and *live,* didn't you? Beck wouldn't take you there, but Versen was going to."

"Yes," Amy whispered. "We were going to get married. . . . Is Joe—"

"Yes," Maurer said, "he's dead." They stood for a moment staring at the big, handsome man, his red-gold hair, the cleft in his chin, the blue eyes staring sightlessly at the hideous grapes on the wallpaper. And suddenly Maurer knew why Gordon Snyder and the Hanker brothers had died. And why Versen had come for Maurer. The game was over, Versen was heading for the big time. He was going to Chicago, and he didn't want to leave any loose ends behind.

MAURER wasn't quite sure at what point he'd realized it had to be Joe Versen. All along the line, the little things had pointed at the deputy, but Maurer had been obsessed with the coincidence of Earl Beck. The pattern had begun taking form with Alf Hanker's clumsy attempt to deal with Maurer. Versen turned that failure into a success with his dictum to leave town. And when the trucked accepted Maurer, when he'd said, "The deputy told me to get out of town," it all tied together. To the trucker that had been a sign from the boss. It had to be Joe Versen.

"You'd better go home now," Maurer said quitely.

"All right." She touched the door knob, and then hesitated. "Do you think Earl will—"

"No," Maurer's voice was harsh. "He's not coming back. Write him off. You aren't the only loser—if you call it losing. There's Dell Austin, too."

"And you want *her,*" Amy said. "I know. . . . Where will Earl go?"

"Some other small town," Maurer said.

"Yes," Amy agreed. "Maybe he'll write. Maybe he'll send for me."

Maurer shrugged helplessly. Nothing he could say would convince her.

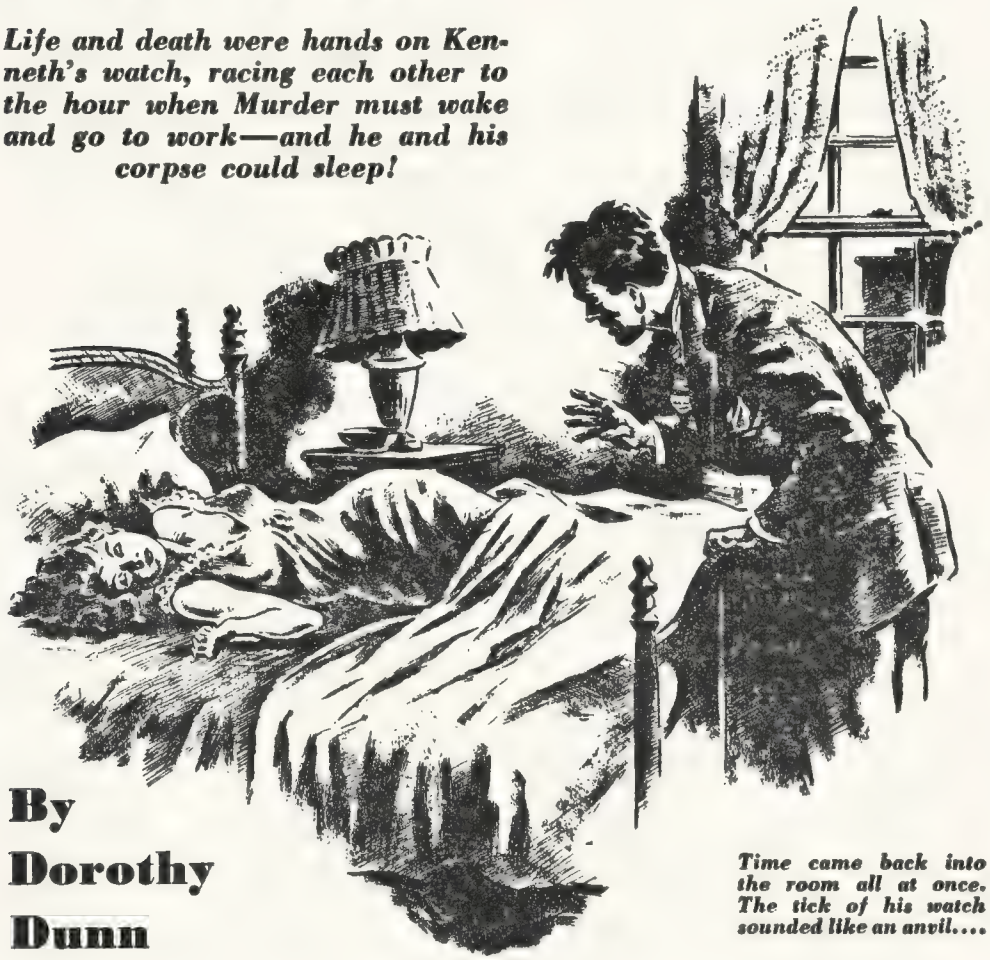
She went then, so quietly he didn't know for a minute that she'd gone.

He stood there by the window, watching the street below. It was empty, except for the brindle dog, aroused from his sleep in the doorway of the store. He sat there in the middle of the deserted street, his head cocked, one ear up, trying to locate what had disturbed him. Nothing else stirred. They were alone, he and Maurer.

Maybe he's a hunting dog, Maurer thought. He wondered if he belonged to anybody. He wondered if his landlord in Chicago would let him keep a dog.

STREET OF FEAR

Life and death were hands on Kenneth's watch, racing each other to the hour when Murder must wake and go to work—and he and his corpse could sleep!



Time came back into the room all at once. The tick of his watch sounded like an anvil....

By Dorothy Dunn

HE WASN'T prepared for that one moment of pause when it was all over; he hadn't counted on anything like that. But the instant he took his hands away from her throat and she slumped back against the pillow, the unexpected factor of emotion assailed him.

The room was still now. There was only his own breathing, not hers any longer, and something about the motionless figure on the bed—the way the head was twisted and stayed as it was—caused him to stop and stare and remember.

All the tenseness drained out of him. He stood there looking at the familiar span of her ivory forehead, the hair so black above it, the brows so delicately arched. He put his hands in his pockets and leaned against the foot rail of the bed companionably, as he always did in the mornings before he went down to breakfast.

Their mornings were gay times—she,

stretching delightedly against the pillow where she lay now, teasing him with her smoky, violet eyes; he, giving her his crooked smile from the foot of the bed, his face still fresh and tingling from the shaving lotion.

Now he looked at the black hair, the forehead and brows, and smiled at her for the last time. He didn't look any lower than that, he didn't want to see her face the way it was now. But the hair was the same, brushed to the sheen of jet silk, and so he looked only at that.

It was like a hundred other mornings at eight o'clock. The glint of sunbeams fell across her hair, the spring fragrance of the blossoming tree beside the open window was too heavy on the air, the starlings were making their usual racket in the branches.

He had on the same brown suit he'd worn yesterday, the one she liked because it did things for his shoulders and flattened his hips. He was wearing his seventy-five dollar beige sport shirt, and looked as immaculate as ever, his reddish hair brushed tight against the well-shaped head.

During this unexpected moment when time, all-important time, stood still, he experienced the hypnotic notion that this morning really was like any other morning.

He reached over the foot rail of the bed, as he always did, and gave her big toe a tweak through the covers. As he did this, he said aloud what he always said to indulge her in the habit of staying in bed mornings: "Sleep, my love."

Hearing his own words in the very silent room, brought him back to a frightening reality. She couldn't feel—she couldn't hear!

He hadn't realized how deep the spell had been upon him until he had touched her unyielding foot. He had almost expected her to squirm away, could almost hear her throaty reproach.

Time came back into the room all at once. The tick of his watch sounded like an anvil. The starlings seemed to be screaming at him. He glanced down at her. Why had he touched her toe with the old teasing gesture? He could break it off now and she wouldn't squeal or wiggle back luxuriously away from him. *Sleep, my love.* She would sleep forever!

He gripped the foot rail in sudden panic. He couldn't control the constriction of his throat, the twitching of his lips, the tears. He had to pull himself together and go down to breakfast as though nothing had happened! But he kept remembering her in flashes that were like knife thrusts, and each memory was a forgotten picture of her sweetness that started his tears all over again.

Finally, he heard the knock on the door. He must be very late by now. He jumped away from the bed toward her frivolous dressing table. He stood there trembling, staring foolishly at the thin grey panel of wood that guarded his privacy.

Ellen's voice was full of morning cheer.

"Breakfast, Mr. Kenneth! You're late this morning."

"Right away, Ellen."

He couldn't tell whether it sounded natural or not. His blood was pounding too hard in his ears.

But he'd have to go right down. He'd have to eat as heartily as ever. Good Lord, there would be pancakes, two eggs, bacon, and two cups of coffee! He'd have to kid around with Nancy and be quick with his chatter.

He dashed cold water across his eyes, combed his hair over again, and then stepped into the hall, closing the door after himself casually. He left the note there on her dressing table in plain sight.

He took the curving staircase two at a time, trying to whistle blithely. Bouncing. He always went out on the terrace bouncing for breakfast. But the boogie tune was off-key and his heels sounded jerky on the flagstones. Bad actor, he thought. Bad actor. But he had to keep trying.

He blew into Nancy's ear as he passed her chair and pinched her youth-blooming cheek.

"Morning, gorgeous!"

"Hi, Ken. Bolt that food, will you? If I have to cut another nine o'clock class because of my slow driver, I might as well drop Pinky's course. And I need that credit to get my degree in June."

Ken stuck his fork into the pancakes, but just the sight of the food stabbed at his stomach unpleasantly.

"For a degree in the family from good old U.C.L.A., I might even skip my breakfast—or at least one course. How's that for evidence that you have the perfect brother-in-law?"

She wrinkled her nose at him.

"And listen to you gripe about your gnawing hunger pains all the way? No thanks! Just use a tablespoon and hurry. Do you know the story about what one man did with the help of the Lord and a tablespoon?"

He knew the story. He clapped a hand over his mouth in an imaginary gesture of nausea that was real.

"You and your appetite killers!" He shifted the bite of pancake around in his mouth. "Get the car out, why don't you? I'll be right there."

"Yes, master."

She ran her fingers through his hair the wrong way as she went by.

He sat there gulping at the sight of the food, the mush of the bite of pancake lying in a lump in his throat. But he had to make it look like any other morning. He always dropped Nancy at the University on his way to the studio. He always ate a big breakfast. Two simple things, so hard to do now.

Sleep, my love!

Ellen came out with a steaming cup of hot coffee.

"What's the matter, Mr. Ken? That food wait too long and get limp so as you can't eat it.

"Nope. Just the kid in a hurry. I'll catch a bite later."

The car skidded to a stop in the driveway. Ellen sighed fondly.

"That Miss Nancy's got more pep than breakfast food. She comes in at all hours and gets up fresh as a daisy. Now, Miz Leda—"

"Miss Leda is lazy, but, oh, so nice!" he said, trying to get his wink just right. "Incidentally, Ellen, she said to tell you she wants to sleep at least until noon. And she wants you to have chicken for tonight. One guest for dinner this evening, I think."

The horn sounded. He got up, giving Ellen a pat on her plump arm.

"Bye, beautiful."

"Go on with you, Mr. Kenneth!" Her pleased, rippling laughter followed him out to the car. Like any other morning.

Sleep, my love!

NANCY said, "Shut up and drive carefully. I have to look over Pinky's notes. Sometimes just being there isn't enough."

"You ought to stay home at night and study. Fine time you pick to study!"

"Don't be silly. The night was made for . . . skip it . . . you'll be getting me into a conversation."

"You expect to pass without a lot of hard work?"

"Natch. Shut up, will you? I work on the theory of intense concentration."

He shut up.

He drove out Santa Monica to Westwood. The stream of cashmere sweaters, plaid skirts, and saddle shoes began here. A stream of clean, bright youngsters in the pink.

He stopped at the usual corner by the square. A tall, sallow-faced young man was leaning against a letter box and his dark eyes glowed in their direction like coals. The long, artistic fingers of his right hand were beautifully arranged around the stubby bowl of his pipe. He had black, wavy hair and a striking, sensitive face. Looked like a poet.

"On time, Nancy! And Lord Byron over there is giving you the eye. He looks like something worth dropping a hanky for. See you tonight."

She didn't get out. She didn't rally as usual at the prospect of a new male animal. She said: "Could you drive me on up the campus this morning, Ken? I'm tired."

He was blocking traffic, so he moved on past the stream of students going up the walk. He wished she'd got out back there. His nerves stretched tight when he talked, and now he'd have to make the good-by all over again.

But Nancy didn't wait for it. She said "Thanks, Ken," and got out quickly, which wasn't like her at all. He rounded the circle and drove back off the campus, on out toward Culver City.

Nancy's white, strained face faded from his mind as soon as she had slammed the door of the car. He was back again behind the grey wood panel of the bedroom; back in the world that had been his with Leda; tangled up again in the memories of her dark hair rippling over white shoulders.

Sleep, my love!

Kenneth Harris, movie producer, was driving to work. That's all anybody knew. They didn't know that the hands on the wheel of the Cadillac had choked his wife to death two hours ago. They were nicely-tapered hands, with a freckle or two on the backs. They were gentle-looking hands. He looked down at them, fascinated, as though he were inspecting something that didn't belong to him. They didn't look any different than they ever had. He turned them both over to scrutinize the palms that had pressed into Leda's throat. He knew he was being childish, like a baby contemplating its own toes. But his hands were different now. They ought to look different. He had killer hands now.

He was snapped back to reality again. But he grabbed at the wheel too late! The guard rail was already splitting, the back of the car already rising in the air, Momentum. Immovable force. Steel—heavier steel than cheaper cars—superstructure of steel rising above his head in a giddy arc that put the nylon seat covers upside down—smell gaseous smell like an operating room nightmare—steel—heavy steel, crushing, bending, twisting. The atoms of matter seemed to come alive and screech.

Sleep, my . . . .

Nancy's strained, white face was floating above his head. It didn't look like Nancy. She was always clear-eyed and happy, light-hearted with health. He tried to lift his head, but it was too heavy. There was a leg down there encased in a cast and hanging by a chain above the bed. His hand was lying across his stomach and he could feel the cast there, too. But he couldn't move his hand away. He wished he could move it so he wouldn't have to

look at it. That's what he'd been doing before, looking at the few freckles, inspecting the palms.

Nancy was dropping tears down his neck.

"Oh, Ken! Ken, Leda has been—"

A bundle of white starch pulled Nancy away. "Please!" it said. "Mr. Harris is not strong enough to be upset. There's a chance for him if he rests."

Ken wanted to reach out and push the nurse away. He wanted to talk.

"Nancy, come back."

"Please," said the quiet voice again.

"Get out," Ken ordered. "I know my wife has been killed, so stop saying 'please'."

The white uniform retreated and Nancy's face came back into focus.

"Ken! You already know about Leda?"

"Yes, I know. She was strangled."

"But your accident happened right after you left me, not twenty minutes after. You've been unconscious ever since, and you couldn't have known this morning! You came down whistling—"

"I knew then, Nancy. I killed her."

Her eyes were round with disbelief. They moved across his face with the same approving look he always got from her. He liked this kid sister of Leda's, and she liked him. It had been his suggestion that she live with them while she was finishing up at U.C.L.A. He hated what was going to happen to her eyes when she realized that he was telling the truth.

Nancy put her hand on his cheek and made him look at her.

"You can't expect me to believe that, Ken! Why, nobody would believe it! Everybody knows how much in love you and Leda were. You worshipped her and spoiled her, and I happen to know how deeply she felt about you. Leda and I didn't have many secrets from each other, Ken. I've seen her cry with joy, just talking about you. And she told me once that she slept half the day because it made the time shorter when you'd be back home. Why, Leda—"

"Stop it!" said Ken, his throat knotting unbearably. "Stop it, Nancy. And don't make me say it over and over. I killed Leda. I killed her this morning before breakfast."

Nancy was shaking with convulsive jerks now.

"You didn't!" she cried. "Ken, you couldn't have! Who do you think did it? You must be trying to shield someone. Who, Ken?"

He sighed wearily. Here it was, the testimony that he'd known would save him. Anyone who knew Ken and Leda would swear he hadn't done it. There was that tree by the bedroom window, and the window was left open for Leda's morning sleep. Once, they'd had a pathetic, amateur prowler who got in that way. Leda's scream scared him off and the fellow had never been caught. It was possible for Leda to have been killed by some stray intruder.

That's why he'd wanted to be on time for breakfast, to act as happy as he always was. She'd have been found at noon, the open window breathing the menace of an outside force which had violated the privacy of a room. And the note on the dressing table would open still another channel of investigation. It might not occur to the police that he had killed his own wife. He loved her, and there certainly wasn't any money motive.

He had planned it that way. He had lain there beside her in the night, his cheek pressed against the soft, fragrant hair, planning it, knowing that he was going to choke her.

Nancy's nails were hurting his cheek, she pressed so hard in her hysteria.

"Ken, don't lie now to protect anyone! The truth is going to mean so much. The police are already trying to trace Shell because one of his notes was lying on her dressing table."

HE WINCED when he heard the name. Shell! That's all of the name he knew, all it had taken to wreck his life. The stubby backhand of a signature on all those notes, the scraps of paper in Leda's desk covered with her small, curlicue handwriting on which she had poured her heart out to Shell in return.

He could remember every word of her last note to him:

> My Darling:
> We'll have to wait, although I'm not sure I can stand being away from you much longer. Ken has been so good to me, I owe him something. Please don't try to see me for the next few months. You know how much I love you and how little I trust myself when I'm with you. It won't be much longer, I promise you. Please try to—

The note had broken off there at the end of the scratch paper. It was really the scratch paper that had infuriated Ken first. He could picture her copying the letter over later on the scented, flower-decked stationery like a school girl with her first crush. He had wheeled on Leda that time in impotent rage.

"You never copied over letters you wrote me! Half the time I couldn't even read your scribbling. Who the hell is this lonely heart? And how are you planning to get rid of good old Ken in the next few months?"

Leda had stared at him, as if his outburst stunned her. Then her smoky eyes had melted into the violet haze that had always reflected what he'd thought was her love looking at him. She didn't explain. She just opened her arms and said: "Ken! Ken, darling, you're jealous!"

He'd let her hold him close and laugh at him for being a "silly boy." Finally she'd said: "I love you, Ken. I thought you trusted me."

"I do, Leda. But, my Lord—" He had cried a little.

"That's what you get for reading someone else's mail," she'd said. "Mama will have to teach you to be more polite."

The way she had smiled at him then had made him sure of her love, made him almost forget Shell.

Then, two nights later, he had found the last note from Shell lying open on her dressing table:

> Sweetheart, you're wrong. You don't owe Ken a thing, you're just mixed up. He doesn't give a damn what you do, I'm convinced of that. I can't stand this separation you suggest. Maybe that sounds weak, but my love is so strong that it makes all the rest of me weak by comparison. Please send for me. I don't want to frighten you or sound melodramatic, but I'm sure of one thing: If I don't see you soon, I'm likely to kill myself—or you. You've no idea how the empty days depress my mind, keep me from being myself. Please, darling! I love you so much that you shouldn't torment me like this. Your letters don't help. They aren't honest. They don't even sound like you. I've got to talk to you.
>
> Shell.

Ken had stood there with the letter in his hand, shaking and white, hating the firm strokes of the signature. There was a ring of desperate honesty in this note that Leda couldn't smile off.

He had jerked his wife toward him roughly. He had called her a name out of the squalid depth of his own misery.

"Now talk, damn you!"

She had pulled away from him for the first time, looking at him with stunned, hurt eyes. There was no softness in her face now, no deceit. There was only a cold dignity that he had never seen before and it took her miles away from him.

"I'll explain, Ken. I'm sorry I didn't do it before. I was just sure that you trusted me more than most men trust their wives."

"No doubt I did!"

She'd left the room then, calling back: "We'll talk about it in the morning if you don't mind. I don't like the mood you're in."

He'd gone to bed then, planning that he

would kill her. Shell wouldn't have her; nobody would. He didn't want to wait and listen to her telling him how she'd fallen in love with another man against her will, that she wanted a divorce. He wouldn't even listen to a corny plot like that in a story conference at the studio.

Several hours later, she had come to bed and he had pretended to be asleep.

She had kissed him lightly and then had settled down beside him so that her hair was against his cheek.

All night long he'd fought with pictures of a signature that was Shell. He gloated over the stubby, husky figure that matched the broad backhand strokes of the pen. He gloated by pointing dramatically at a dead Leda and saying: "There she is, heart-throb. She's all yours."

Shell had said in the note that he would kill himself, or kill Leda. Maybe that line was what got Ken's mind off on that track. From there on out it was just bad theater, but he couldn't stop the urge.

Nancy was still talking. Sweet, happy youngster who had been so fond of her sister, so close to her! It was going to be tough for her, Leda's death coming just a few months before finals. She was counting on that degree for some silly reason, and he hoped she would go ahead and get it. He hadn't considered Nancy when he'd decided to keep Leda dead rather than lose her alive. He wished he'd thought about Nancy. She looked so stricken now.

"Ken, please help by telling what you know. I'll die if the police drag Shell into this because of me! They might even consider his last letter a threat of some sort. He said something about killing in it, which was all my fault. I was just taking the weak sister way out."

Something began hammering against Ken's brain.

I owe Ken something . . . .

"You're mixed up. Ken doesn't give a damn—"

Just a few months . . . .

Nancy would have her degree in just a few months! he thought wildly.

Leda writing on scratch paper didn't make sense. She wouldn't have to make a first draft of a letter. Not Leda. Leda laughing away his jealousy, taking him into her arms, not bothering to explain!

"Nancy! Good Lord, Nancy! Why was Leda writing to this Shell?"

"I couldn't do it, Ken. I wanted to finish school, but I just couldn't write Shell without wanting to rush right out and find him instead. Leda used to help me by writing notes for me to copy. She wanted me to finish college and told me you were banking on it. I suppose, actually, she didn't want me to rush into marriage."

Nancy's words brought a singing joy back to Ken. He knew the feeling was as futile as being sorry, but Leda had loved him! The melting violet of her eyes had been for him alone, had never been for anyone else. Nothing mattered, strangely enough, except that.

"Have I met Shell?" he asked foolishly.

"You saw him this morning, Ken."

Ken remembered. The tall, striking-looking, intense young man. Lord Byron.

"Don't ever let him be jealous, Nancy. Not for a minute if he loves you too much. Love can be so strong that it drives a person crazy. I killed Leda because I loved her too much."

Nancy's sobs went into his pillow and she was muttering something foolish about it being partly her fault. Then Ken noticed the plainclothesman by the foot of his bed. That was good. He didn't want to tell it again. "Got it?" he asked.

"Got it," said the mask-like face. "We figured maybe so."

Ken closed his eyes. He knew that time would stop soon and the room would become still with death, just as Leda's bedroom had become still. *Sleep, my love! We'll soon be together again.*

He hoped he would die before the sun went down.

DANGER—

CHAPTER ONE

A Girl's Best Friend

HE WAS walking slowly down the tunnel that leads from Grand Central to the Roosevelt, and it seemed to him that everyone else in the city had a place to go and a time to be there—except himself. They shouldered by him, and when they were ahead of him, many of them looked back with small, sharp glances of annoyance, labeling him both tourist and idler.

He saw her first as slim ankles coming toward him in a cadence that matched his own step. The skirt of a trim gabardine suit swirled around the arched line of calf. Trim hips in a slow walk, shoulders a shade too broad for beauty. Column of throat and thoroughbred face, gout of deep red-gold hair with life and movement about it.

Above the lean cheek-hollows, set in the fragile bone sockets, her grey eyes looked at him and through him with a dull and hopeless fear that was as evident as though she had cried out for help.

By John MacDonald

DEATH AHEAD

The stubby muzzle of a Police Positive was pointed at his middle....

He stopped as soon as she had passed him, turned, watched her walk away from him, convinced that in her walk he could detect some of the rigidity of fear. Though he had seen her once before, and that almost two years ago, the memory of her came back with startling clarity.

Two years ago. That put her in the era of Rocky Selka, the vital blonde girl, who had turned coal-town beauty into something special in the way of a photographer's model. Of course. One of Rocky's interminable cocktail parties. Somebody had written a book, or painted a picture, or had become a year older.

Tomorrow's grave held the answer to yesterday's kill—and Mitch the Mouse had a simple choice as to whose it would be—his own or the girl's he loved!

He remembered that he had whistled softly as he had seen the red-haired girl and Rocky, clinging to his arm, had smiled placidly at him and dug sharp nails into his wrist so deeply as to puncture the skin.

But the name? Something with a J—Joan, Jean, June, Jackie. None of those. Jane! That was it. He remembered some wry joke about Plain Jane. As he remembered the name he turned to follow her, walking more rapidly. It was then that he became conscious of someone else following her. But not to overtake her. Moving at the same pace. Maybe it was an accident. But no, the follower was too elaborately casual. Heavy shoulders straining against the seams of a shiny blue suit, pattern of uncut hair, dark whorls against a bull neck. Build like a pork barrel. Heavy tread with feet placed well apart.

He loitered for a moment, then passed the squat follower with quick steps, caught up to Jane. They had neared the end of the tunnel where it widened out, became a part of the station proper.

"Hello there, Jane!" he said, consciously forcing a gay friendliness into his voice.

She whirled quickly, backed slowly away from him until her shoulders touched the tunnel wall. The fear was more evident and under the lipstick her lips had paled.

He looked at her in consternation, and became suddenly aware that the squat follower was beside him, cold eyes on his face. Another man had come up on the other side. Jane looked at him and he saw that memory was struggling behind those eyes.

A small magazine, book and novelty store fronted on the tunnel. Hard hands slapped his pockets, and as he started to move away, to protect, his wrist was caught in a punishing grasp, twisted up into the small of his back, where one more ounce of pressure would snap the bone.

The woman in the shop gasped as he was thrust roughly into her store. The smaller of the two men flipped open a black wallet, showed it to her. "Police business, lady. No need to get excited. We want to talk in here for a minute."

They pushed him back into the sharp angle of a corner, stood heavily blocking his way. The stubby muzzle of a Police Positive pointed at his middle. Jane stood off to one side.

"Identification, mister," the shorter of the two men said. They were cut from the same cloth. Heavy and sharp and alert. Cautious and grim.

They knew he was clean and they let him take out his wallet. Jane stood off to one side, watching with wide eyes from which some of the fear had fled.

The bigger man reached out and took the wallet, riffled through the cards. "Mitchel Murdock. Employed by Arnold and Beem, Industrial Engineers." He turned to the girl. "You know him, Miss Lurner?"

"I—I can't remember. I've seen him. A long time ago. I don't know where."

Murdock said quickly, "One of Rocky's parties. Two years ago. I—I was going with Rocky at the time."

"What broke you two up?" the bigger man asked.

"I don't see how the hell that's any of your business."

"Why did you break up with her? Believe me, brother, you answer it here or at headquarters. Take your choice."

Murdock shrugged. "Mutual agreement. She had some guy named Clary on the string. I was a little hard up for dough. She liked presents. Clary could give her presents. She'd begun to bore me a little. Too vital and too demanding."

The bigger one glanced at Jane. She had begun to remember. She nodded slowly. "I think I met Mr. Murdock at a party about a week after I met Rocky."

He turned back, said, "Where were you six weeks ago? What were you doing?"

"I was in Endicott, Michigan, working at the Norris Tool Company."

"You answered that awful fast, mister."

"I've been in Endicott for the last year and a half without leaving the place, until three days ago. Call the office and check. The phone number is on that card there. Ask for Mr. Beem."

Murdock thought they wouldn't bother. To his surprise one of them went over and asked politely if he could use the phone behind the counter.

"What's this all about?" Murdock asked. He felt better when the man tucked the revolver away.

The question was ignored.

Jane gave him a tremulous smile. The fear had returned. She kept glancing nervously out at the people hurrying by.

The man came back from the phone, frowning. "We'll do some more checking, Mr. Murdock. But you look okay to me. Beem gives you a good word. Where are you staying?"

"At the Carrendor, on Thirty-Seventh."

"How long will you be in town?"

"Until Beem either fires me or sends me out on another job. In other words, I have no idea."

"When was the last time you saw Rocky Selka?"

"About three days after the cocktail party at which I met Miss Lurner."

"You know what happened to her?"

"No, I don't."

"Six weeks ago somebody tied her to a tree in Central Park. When they found her in the morning two of the hardest guys we got in the department wilted like tired lettuce when they got a look at what had been done to her."

Murdock thought of each well-remembered line of Rocky's vibrant body, of her husky gamin voice, of her ceaseless energy, her vanity, her sulky fury when angered. He shut his teeth hard in an unexpected surge of illness. Jane stood, her eyes closed, her lids shadowed. She swayed and for a moment Murdock thought she would faint. Two spots of color stood out against the lividity of her face.

The store owner watched with wide eyes. The two men backed away and Murdock was let out of his corner. One of them said in a low tone to Jane, "Okay, Miss Lurner. You can see we got you pretty well covered. Don't be afraid."

Murdock glanced at his watch as he replaced his billfold. A little after four. "Can I buy you a drink, Miss Lurner?" he said.

She looked at him gravely. "That would be very nice, Mr. Murdock."

They went up the ramp and out the 42nd Street exit. At the door be glanced back. The bigger of the two men was a hundred feet behind them. The other one was not in sight.

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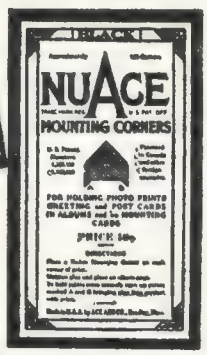

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"The Coral Lounge okay?"

"Fine."

He liked her not taking his arm. He liked the way she matched his step with her long stride.

Selecting one of the alcove tables he guided her toward it. She put her purse on the bench beside her. As Murdock sat beside her he looked across the lounge, through the panes of the door to the lobby. The smaller of the two policemen leaned against a square pillar, apparently reading a newspaper.

THE Martinis were cool and tart. Murdock watched her in profile as she sipped, put the glass down with a hand that shook slightly.

He lit her cigarette. "Now then, Jane," he said, "that's the first time I've ever had a gun held on me. I didn't like the feeling. How are you mixed up in this?"

"Mitchel Murdock," she said tilting her head to one side. "Rocky used to call you Mitch the Mouse. Do you object to being called Mitchel?"

He heard the tightness in her voice, the hysteria held firmly in check. He said easily, "I never did like that mouse handle. But in a way Rocky was right. In those days I was a mouse. Squeaking about enormous plans and never doing anything about them."

She gave him a smile that was a hint of what she could be—without the fear. "And now you're a lion?"

"Just a slightly healthier mouse."

"Mitchel, two weeks after that party, I moved into Rocky's apartment with her. She asked me and I was lonely and I moved in. Everything was fine until—six weeks ago."

"Pretty messy?"

"Very! And good old Jane thought she had enough backbone to make the identification without folding. It was the look on her face—"

Her voice suddenly shattered and she put her face in her hands. Murdock found himself patting her shoulder, saying stupidly, "There, there."

With an effort she pulled herself together, took another sip of the drink, tried to smile at him. "I guess I wasn't as tough as I thought. Three days in the hospital. They called it shock. That's a good word, I guess."

Murdock looked at her. "Jane, what are you afraid of?"

"The police think that whoever did it knew Rocky well enough to get her to walk in the park with him. Rocky thought walking in the park was pure corn, so it had to be somebody pretty convincing. They think that whoever did it is some sort of fiend. Rocky had an address book. They've checked every person in it. Every single one is in the clear. I went back to the apartment from the hospital. Ten days after she—she died, I got a phone call. It was a man. He said, 'I'll have almost as much fun with you as I did with Rocky. Say your prayers, sweetheart.' Then he hung up.

"Some crank," Murdock said. "Some wise guy making with the sour jokes."

"No. A month before she died, Rocky was having trouble with an ex who kept phoning the apartment at all hours. So we got an unlisted number. Whoever called me up had been given that number."

Murdock whistled softly. "The ex was cleared?"

"When Rocky dropped him it hit him hard. He was drinking too much. The night she was killed was the second night of a four day stay in Bellevue for him."

Murdock said, "Besides, he'd be the last one to know the unlisted number, wouldn't he?"

She turned to him, put her hand on his wrist. Her fingers were cold. "Mitchel, do you know what it's like to be scared? To be scared every minute? For the first week it wasn't bad. I kept telling myself that I have the normal amount of courage.

But I kept thinking of how Rocky looked. I still think about the way she looked. And then I look at myself in the mirror and I think of how I will look after he gets me. And I think of the pain and of dying. It's a terrible thing, Mitchel, to know that someone wants to kill you—horribly."

"It doesn't wear off?"

"It gets worse. Everybody I look at. When you spoke to me I saw that you were tall and lean and brown and you have smile wrinkles around your eyes and a sort of—wind-blown look. And I was suddenly sure that you were the one, because that sort of rottenness would have to be hidden down in someone who looked nice and clean. If anybody went around with what they did to Rocky written on their face, they'd be picked up on suspicion. I knew you were the one, and then when you spoke and when you looked so angry at the way that man took your wrist, I knew that you weren't."

"But there was just that phone-call?"

"One of the insurance companies took a full page ad in a national magazine a month ago and across the top of the ad it said, 'When the police can't help you is the moment when the speeding driver . . . .' and so on. Somebody cut out just the words, 'the police can't help you . . . .' I got those words in a plain envelope eight days ago. To address it to me, someone had cut the face off an envelope that came to me. It had been an ad of some sort. They had cut out the address and pasted it on the new envelope. I remembered that I had taken the ad out of my mailbox as I was leaving the apartment and I had crumpled the envelope and dropped it in the street. That means that someone was very close to me, close enough to pick up that envelope. There was no way of tracing it."

Murdock tried to recall the times he had been frightened. He had been crew chief on fifty bomber missions, but there he had faced a known danger, a visible danger.

Her fear was more like the dense, suffocating fear of a timid child afraid of the night. And yet there was nothing timid about her.

He ordered another round, deciding that the best thing he could do for her was to take her mind off the horror, to give her a little space during which she could be at peace.

He began to talk of himself, avoiding all mention of Rocky, watching the way Jane's wary eyes surveyed each new customer who came in, watching the way her vigilance began to slacken as she grew more interested.

He told her how, just before the war, while still in engineering school, he had patented a new type of eccentric worm gear which had brought him in steady small royalties, and still did so. After the war he had tried to live on the royalties in a room on 29th Street, had tried to dream up something else that would be patentable and give him a very necessary margin of security.

Carefully skirting any mention of Rocky Selka, of how her scorn had at last driven him into a job, he told of his hiring by Arnold and Beem as a junior consultant, of his servitude at Norris Tool under a senior consultant whom he considered to be a vastly overrated man.

The recent showdown had come when he had turned in a special report with a carbon to his superior, bitterly criticising the approach of the senior consultant. In retrospect he knew that it had been a childish way of handling the problem, but it had forced matters to an issue. Both of them had been called in off the job. The senior consultant demanded that Murdock be fired. Arnold and Beem were awaiting the report of a third man who had been sent out to Norris Tool. They had asked Murdock to stay in New York until they could make a decision.

"It must be hard, Mitchel, waiting around for them to decide."

He grinned. "I thought all along that if they fired me, I wouldn't care. But in the last couple of days I've found myself wishing every few minutes for Beem to see my point of view. Beem is a sour little man with a head like a grey turnip and a mouth like a knife slit in wet putty."

The comparison had been unfortunate. He saw her shiver and saw her lips stiffen. He resolved to avoid all mention of knives while he was with her.

"You haven't told me what you do for a living, Jane. I guess I never did know."

"At the time I moved in with Rocky I was secretary to the managing editor of *City*. I suppose you read the magazine."

"I like it. Very snide. Very superior."

"A year ago they gave me my own department. I'm in charge of the eager little group that pans the books, movies, shows, clubs, galleries and miscellaneous entertainment. They pay me an exorbitant amount and when I started to go to pieces two weeks ago, they gave me a month off."

By the time Murdock had worked his way halfway through the third round, the drinks had given him boldness.

He said, "Look. You're having a rough time. I'm going slightly bats trying to keep my mind off my own puny little crisis. Let's combine forces. I haven't got any ulterior motives, to coin a phrase. I've got muscles in the right places, and in a pinch I could at least make a target until the cops come a-running. Or have you got a guy who is providing the service I am offering?"

Her smile was suddenly bitter. "I had a guy. Apparently all this got on his nerves. He let me know that we'd get together again after this was all over."

"You'll let him come back?"

"Just to spit in his eye."

THEY had steak together, discovered they both had a secret yen for horse opera, and found a double bill through which they held hands like any high school duo. Murdock was careful to select seats where no one could get behind them.

Rocky's apartment was on 65th. They had been laughing in the cab until the driver turned onto 65th. Then the constraint came over them. Planning to walk, Murdock paid off the driver, followed Jane up the ten feet of anachronistic flagstone walk to the sheet of glass with chrome handle that served as the outer door.

New protection had taken over on the night shift, and a leaner policeman strolled up behind them. Murdock guessed that he was covering the possibility of anyone waiting inside the building.

She handed him the key and Murdock fitted it into the inside door, went ahead of her into the dimly lighted corridor-lobby of the building.

The policeman coughed. She turned to him and said, "Mr. Murdock will take me to my door, officer."

The officer said, "Mr. Murdock was checked, Miss Lurner. He's clear. But I better go up with you all the same. We can't keep the people who live here from clicking the door latch when they get a buzz."

Murdock remembered that the apartment was on the fourth floor. They rode up in silence in the tiny elevator. The officer took the key from Jane and unlocked the door.

The policeman clicked on the lights, knowing just where to reach for the switch. In two minutes he covered the apartment. Kitchen, closets, every possible hiding place.

"Miss Lurner," he said, "are you going to change your mind about having a matron stay here with you?"

She smiled. "No. Once I'm in here with the door locked I feel safe enough." She turned to Murdock. "You will stay for one drink?"

He nodded. The policeman said,

" 'Night, folks. Phone us fifteen minutes before you go out in the morning, miss."

"Of course." He shut the door behind him. Jane went to it, slipped a shiny new bolt into place and locked the knob with a short, stout length of chain.

When she went to make the drinks Murdock looked around the apartment. The flamboyant touch of Rocky Selka was still in evidence. The massive fireplace of brick painted white was flanked on each side by two huge blue couches. Between them was a blonde wood coffee table.

Jane came back with the drinks, set his on the coffee table within his reach and sat opposite him. With a rather odd smile she said, "Rocky felt the decor matched her personality. I haven't had the heart to change it."

"How was Rocky doing in the modeling department?" he asked.

Jane frowned. "It had her worried. She wasn't aging very gracefully. She lived too hard for that. The camera was beginning to pick up lines where there shouldn't have been any. And you remember how she liked to eat. She was thickening a bit around the waist. She'd go on fantastic diets and lose a few pounds and then eat a few more back on. Her income was sliding off and I knew it bothered her, though she never spoke of it."

"Clary had money."

"Clary lasted about two months. Rocky wasn't a gal to marry for money and security. With her it had to be love, but she never stayed in love long enough."

Mitch saw the glint of tears on her cheeks. She said, "Rocky was wild and crazy and wonderful. Nothing ever got her down. And no one has ever been nicer to me."

"Why would anyone kill her?"

"I don't know," she said helplessly. "That's just it. Something was twisted inside the murderer's mind."

Murdock frowned. "That fits with the way she was killed, but it doesn't fit the threats made to you. With those people who do—that sort of thing, it is usually a complete stranger that they pick on. The crime is carefully planned and, except for the manner of death, motiveless. The killing quiets the fiend down until the next one. You could almost make a truism. Fiends don't pick on their friends. Did she leave any money?"

"About two hundred dollars after her debts were paid. She was buried in some little Pennsylvania town. Her brother came to get the body. He seemed shocked. Since she owned half of the furniture here, I gave him my check for a thousand dollars to cover her half. The only thing he wanted was her scrapbooks."

"Jewelry?"

"She had hocked a lot of it to pay the quack doctors who were putting her on those strange diets. She had a few cheap things that I mailed to her brother."

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He went over to her, held her trembling hands tightly. When she had control of herself, he picked up his drink, finished it and said, "Lunch tomorrow?" About twelve or twelve-thirty?

"Yes, Mitchel."

She went to the door with him. "Good night, Mitchel." She stood and looked up at him, her eyes grave, her hand outstretched. Her hand was warm and firm. "Thanks," she whispered.

He stood outside the door until he heard the bolt shot, the chain fastened. He stood for a long time in the silent corridor. He shuddered and walked quickly to the elevator. He suspected how much courage it took to stay alone in that apartment. Alone with memories of her last look at Rocky Selka. Alone with the fear of a killer who wanted her to die—unpleasantly.

The little elevator droned down and he let himself out, pulled the door shut behind him and tested it to see that it was locked. The sidewalks were deserted. That part of the city slept. Manhattan cast a pink-orange glow against the overcast sky and in the distance was the hum of traffic, the grunt of a river tug, the empty clatter of a train.

CHAPTER TWO

Ask a Body

EARLY the next morning he left his hotel and went to the library to look over the files of recent newspapers. The killing of Rocky Selka was not hard to find. It had been perfect tabloid fare. Beautiful model. Horrid death. Not one of them had dared publish a picture of Rocky as she had looked in death. They talked in guarded language about a sharp knife, torn clothes, and there was the inevitable reference to Jack the Ripper.

He followed the newspaper accounts, as, day by day they moved further back in the papers, dwindled to nothingness.

What would have been a twenty day wonder in a small city lasted about three days in Manhattan. The immense cauldron bubbled, and the fact of Rocky's death, brought for a few moments to the surface, sank back down into obscurity.

He learned nothing from the accounts. Nothing of importance. Miss Lurner reported that for a few days preceeding the murder, Miss Selka had acted preoccupied and quite gay—as though she enjoyed some secret triumph. On the evening of the murder she had dressed without particular care, had taken a taxi from a stand near the corner and had been taken to Times Square. No one had been found who had seen her there, which was a natural state considering the number of slightly faded blondes who can be found at that location any night in the year.

No one had reported any disturbance in the park, but that was also natural, as Rocky's wide generous mouth had been plugged with one of her own nylons, the second one used to tie the first one in place, knotted at the back of her head.

She had been tied to a small tree. The long shoulder strap from her purse had been torn off, used to lash her wrists together. Her arms had been above her head, her wrists lashed on the other side of the small tree. The stump of a pruned limb kept her from sliding down. A discolored place on her jaw led the medical examiner's office to assume that she had been knocked unconscious and had been tied up in that state. However, her contorted face had led them to assume further that she had regained consciousness later.

Her body was found forty feet from a seldom-used path at 8:15 the following morning by two small boys who were pretending to be Indians. The screaming of the children had attracted the attention of a man who had immediately gotten in touch with the police.

Rocky's purse contained slightly over twenty dollars. It was twelve feet from the body. The ground had been too hard to show footprints. No fingerprints were available. No weapon was found.

There was no newspaper account of the threats made against Jane.

Murdock arrived at the apartment at noon. Jane's voice, thin and metallic over the house phone above her bell, asked, "Who is it?"

"Mitchel."

"Come right up, Mitchel." The door buzzed and he opened it, went up into the apartment.

She looked rested and not as taut. He told her so.

"You're good for me, Mitchel. I'm even hungry. First time in weeks, I think. We can have a cocktail here."

She leaned against the stove as he made the Martinis. She said, "You look solemn."

"I am. How did Rocky act those few days? I mean what did she say and do? I have a strange little hunch that the secret may be hidden there."

Jane shrugged. "I don't mind talking about it today as much as I did yesterday The police questioned me for hours, taking everything down. They didn't get anything out of it. At least, they didn't act as if they did."

"Rocky had acted pleased?"

"She seemed pleased. She seemed satisfied and—well, excited, as though something was stimulating her."

"How about her diets?"

Jane tilted her head to one side, an index finger at the corner of her mouth. "That's funny. I just remembered. Usually she gave me a lot of reasons when she stopped a diet. She didn't the last time. She just began to eat like a team of horses. No excuses. No rationalizations."

"How did she usually act when she slipped off a diet?"

"Oh, guilty and sort of cross. She'd look at herself in the full length mirrors in the bedroom and sigh and sigh. She always said that our bathroom scales were off, and that she couldn't possibly be up to a hundred and thirty-five."

"What was her best weight?"

"For her work? Her best weight was a hundred and twenty-five. If she let herself get to a hundred and forty, she'd have no work at all. She broke a few camera dates. She hadn't done that before."

"I remember that she liked being photographed."

"She did when I first moved in here. But during the last seven or eight months she was growing tired of it. Too much competition by the young blood. She was an exhibitionist, but she had a lot of pride."

He poured the drinks and Jane carried the tray ahead of him into the main room. They sat facing each other as they had twelve hours before.

"Look, Mitchel, are you playing policeman?"

He lost his scowl. "Maybe I am, Jane. But somehow it's very much like the business I'm in. Something goes wrong. You have to dig around among the tools of production and find out what has caused it. And it isn't just mechanical causes. The human factor is always there. Motivation is the key. You've given me certain facts on which we can start making assumptions. The idea is to guess what happened in Rocky's mind to make her act the way she did."

Jane Lurner said, "Let me think. Money. Security. A windfall. No need to work. That would do it. That would be sufficient reason."

"Marrying money?"

"If she was considering marriage she would have told me. And it couldn't be by inheritance. Her brother would have known."

"So we get over to the question of scruples and basic honesty."

"How would you analyze her?"

He smiled. "Rocky was in many ways as simple as a child. A child who would merrily grab another kid's ice cream cone and eat it with relish. She was generous and frank and as honest as a pirate."

Jane began to look intent. "So the wheels begin to mesh. A double-cross. She fell into something and decided to make a large cut of it. A nice clean murder might point the way to the murderer. So he, she or it made it a very messy murder so as to set the police on the trail of a psycopath who doesn't exist." She thought for a moment and said even more eagerly, "And that would partially explain why I am brought in on it." Her eyes grew puzzled. "But why? I don't know what sort of angle she was working on."

Murdock stood up and began to pace back and forth. "Where are we? We assume Rocky was murdered because she was trying to grab some money. She wouldn't steal, but she would hijack. She fell into an illegal angle somewhere. We make sense so far. But why frighten you? What do scared people do?"

"They run," she said simply. "And, brother, I've considered it."

"What is the most important thing that you had in common with Rocky?"

Jane said slowly, "We didn't really have much—oh, I see what you mean! We lived in the same apartment."

"Exactly, and running would vacate the apartment. See where this has carried us? We may be way off the beam, but so far it makes sense. Rocky had a chance to make money out of something connected with this apartment. She knew too much and was killed. You don't know anything, but maybe you can be frightened into leaving. What does that suggest?"

"Something hidden here!"

"Something valuable. And let's assume that the mysterious somebody offered Rocky a bribe to vacate and talk you into vacating. Maybe they made the bribe too big. Rocky was shrewd. She caught on. She held out for more. Maybe half."

Jane slowly shook her head. "The place was unfurnished when we got it. It was recently redecorated. So if we're right, it has to be something hidden in the walls, or something planted here by one of Rocky's friends."

"The police have been checking Rocky's friends. I'll bet on the wall theory."

"Mitchel, do we take all this conjecturing to the police?"

"After we nose around a little. The starting point is to find out who had this place before you girls took it over."

THE dusty-looking young woman in the rental agency office had a long, white, weary neck and a bored manner.

She let Mitchel say, "I'm interested in—"

"We have no vacancies pending and a long list when we do have."

"I don't want an apartment."

She stared at him for a moment. "Mister, stranger words have never been spoken in this office. Thank you. You refresh me. Wait a minute! I get it now. You have a friend who wants an apartment."

Mitchel grinned. "No. You couldn't force me to rent anything. Now in return for my being refreshing, how about giving me a list of the people who have had apartment four-A at this address." He put the slip of paper in front of her.

"Can't tell you. Confidential information."

"Bet you five bucks you don't know whose picture this is?"

"Could be Lincoln."

"Let's just say I'm trying to trace a friend the hard way."

The five dollar bill suddenly disappeared. She leafed through a small card file, pulled out four cards. "Got a pencil? We took over the place six years ago. Mr. and Mrs. Finlay Schoder were there for two years. Forwarding address eighteen-o-one Marine Avenue, Portland, Oregon. Next, a Miss Carol Lorac for one year. Forwarding address, General Delivery, Jersey City. Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Greenlaight for fifteen months. Forwarding address, 222 West 73rd Street. Next, a Miss Alicia Selka—Hey! Was she the dish who was carved a while back? Her name is crossed out here and Jane Lurner penciled in."

"I guess I've got all I need," Mitchel said, pocketing the slip on which he had been writing.

She eyed him speculatively. "Like it says in the movies, a private eye? Cops don't hand out bills."

"Stay away from those double features," he said.

She smiled. "Come back again some time, mister."

MRS. ARTHUR GREENLAIGHT was giving a party when Murdock arrived. Murdock was met at the apartment door, swept into the ornate study on a foam of conversation and was introduced to the guest of honor. The guest of honor gave Murdock a green, baleful look. Her name was Poots. She wore a ruffled napkin around her white furry throat and she was daintily eating a white mouse.

A young man of Latin extraction sat near Poots nursing a pink drink. He glared at Murdock and hissed, "Parties for cats!"

"Shut up, Angel," Mrs. Greenlaight said cheerfully. She clasped pink hands and beamed at Murdock. "You brought it, I hope. Where is it? In your pocket? Please don't keep Poots and her mummy in suspense, you foul little man."

Murdock felt foul—and enjoyed it.

"Don't tell me you aren't the jewelry man! With the darling little gold mesh collar for Poots? Who are you, anyway?"

"Please, Mrs. Greenlaight. You didn't give me a chance to tell you—"

Mrs. Greenlaight turned her back on him, went over to the couch, sat down heavily and glared at Murdock. "I knew it wouldn't come. Even though they promised. And now it'll be too late. She will have the mouse all finished in another minute."

In a distant room was a noise like someone walking up and down a piano keyboard on their hands and knees.

Over the discordant sound Murdock said loudly and desperately, "I'm conducting a survey for United Opinions Incorporated. What is Mr. Greenlaight's occupation?"

Angel answered. "Composer. Can't you hear him?"

Mrs. Greenlaight sulked. The piano stopped abruptly and a man of not more than twenty-five appeared in the doorway. He glowered. "Yak-yak-yak," he said. "Who could work?"

Five minutes later, after a few fragmentary answers, Murdock fled, encountering in the corridor a young man who bore with prideful air a small and expensive looking package.

"Meeyow!" Murdock said.

The young man gave him a look of cool disdain.

MURDOCK softly replaced the phone on the cradle and shrugged at Jane who stood near him. He said, "Mr. Finlay Schoder is off the list, too. His mother reports that Finlay and wife have been in Bangkok, Siam, for the past year. He's with an engineering outfit there."

"That leaves the palindrome," she said.

"The what?"

"Palindrome. Something that reads the same backwards as forwards. Carol Lorac.

The name has to be a phony, of course."

"When I asked about her at the post office the man gave me a small lecture on how busy post offices are and how maybe if I'd asked a few years ago he might be able to tell me if they were holding mail in that name. What luck did you have?"

"Mrs. Royal, the janitor's wife remembered her. Mrs. Royal remembers everyone who has lived here for the past century. But her description isn't what you'd call adequate. Very flossy type, my dear. Dressed as though there were little hooks she could undo in time to slow music. Theatrical, I'd say. Straight black hair worn pageboy, pale face and dark lipstick. Had several gentleman friends who stopped in at rather unusual hours. She was as hard as a gambler's heart."

"Bless Mrs. Royal! A phony name, a poor address and a description that matches five thousand New York women."

"The key word in this little guessing game is 'theatrical.'"

He snapped his fingers. "Of course!"

THE agent's name was Harry Mint and he rented desk space near an openwork elevator shaft in a converted warehouse, walled in by plywood which had managed to warp. Taped to the office walls were large glossy prints of unknowns lovingly inscribed "To my best pal, Harry." Harry was a small man with a terrier face and a prehensile nose, dressed in a conservative pinstripe.

"Who said I handled Carol Lorac?" he asked Murdock.

"Popokouras said that he vaguely remembered you handling her at one time. Stripper wasn't she?"

"Not that raw, friend. A club act. The same general idea but more intimate, you know what I mean?"

Murdock nodded. "I think so. I'm very anxious to get in touch with her."

"Look, whatever you want, I can get. I got a girl who makes Lorac look like Whistling's Mother. I don't like to sound off on my people, but this girl, her name is Sonny Day, she can—"

"It's got to be Lorac."

"And I haven't got her any more. It's things like this that make them call me Crushed Mint." He laughed mechanically and Murdock knew it was an ancient gag. Murdock laughed politely.

"I could pay the expense of your locating her, Mr. Mint."

Harry brightened at once. He said, "It might be pretty tough. I can try, though." He licked his lips. "How much you willing to pay?"

"Would twenty be enough?"

"Call me here at five o'clock and maybe I can give you a line on her." Murdock stood up and Mint's eyes focused in the general area of Murdock's hip pocket. Murdock took out his wallet, placed two tens on the corner of the desk.

At four when Murdock phoned him, Mint said, "She's got herself a new name and you can find her with a comic magician at Club Ninety-One near Sheridan Square. She calls herself Bobby Wooster. The act stinks."

JANE agreed that it would be better if he went alone. He arrived at Club Ninety-One at ten. It was a typical Village tourist trap. A basement club with a mirrored staircase, a hungry-handed head waiter at the foot of the stairs, a flock of phony reserved signs on the tables, dim lighting, postage stamp tables, a brassy off-beat little group of depressed musicians concealing their inadequacies behind blasts of bebop.

There were about nine tables of customers. They had the look of having been slugged on the sidewalk and dragged down into the basement club against their will.

Murdock went to the bar and ordered a drink. When Wondero the Magician

came on, introduced by an M.C. with a brassy voice, Murdock turned and watched the act. Wondero was bald, scarecrow thin, and wore the traditional outfit of the burlesque comic. His best prop was a magician's table that insisted on sagging at dangerous angles in spite of his attempts to prop up the legs.

When he got ready for what was apparently going to be a very complicated trick, Bobby Wooster walked across in front of him. She wore high-heeled red shoes and a silver mesh bathing suit. The silk hat, mechanically activated, spun like a black top.

As far as Murdock could see, Bobby Wooster's part in the act consisted of walking back and forth to distract the magician. The finale of the act came when Wondero waved his wand at Bobby Wooster. Every light in the house went out for about four seconds and the darkness was intense. When they went back on, Bobby was gone. Wondero stood with a silly grin holding the two fragments of the bathing suit costume.

After the show was over and a steaming pack of dancers began milling around on the floor, Murdock composed his note. "Miss Wooster—Harry Mint suggested I talk to you." Five dollars bought Murdock the table he wanted, in a secluded position in a far corner. Another five to the waiter insured delivery of the note.

Bobby Wooster came through the labyrinth of tables with the same mechanically sultry walk she had used in the act. The black hair was no longer pageboy, but was piled high, with gaudy intricacy. She wore a wine red dress.

Murdock stood up as she slid into the chair opposite him. Her face, pale and smooth as seen from a distance, had a damp, pulpy look about it. When she spoke he saw that her teeth were small, yellowed, uneven.

"What about?" she asked. It was the direct response to the note.

"Drink?" he asked.

Her eyes narrowed. "I don't like angles, mister. Who are you and what do you want? Spill it fast."

"Rough, aren't you?"

"Rougher than you know." She started to stand up.

"It's about a slight case of murder," he said. He didn't smile.

She dropped back into the chair as though her legs had been kicked out from under her. Her face went expressionless, eyelids half masking her dead blue eyes.

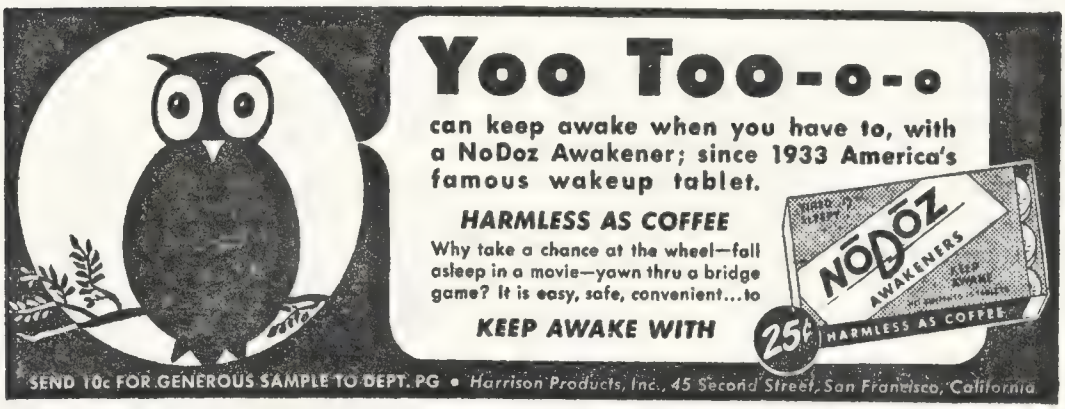
"You've got the wrong gal, mister. You local or federal?"

"Neither."

The eyelids went up and the cold hate was obvious. "Don't scare me like that!"

"You've got murder on your mind?"

"No. To be honest, I've got a small record. They've got my prints. They love to yank me in and play cop. They do it



whenever they get bored with life. So you've got the edge."

"A few years back you lived on Sixty-Fifth Street. Apartment four-A."

She seemed to be thinking. "I begin to get it. But you're off the beat, mister. That was Steen Wilse. We used to be married. I used my business name."

"Where can I find him?"

"Auburn prison. He's been there for over a year. I think he'll be out in Nineteen-fifty-seven."

"What was the charge?"

"He and another boy worked over a man. The guy had a thin skull. Steen jacked him a little too hard."

"Did this Wilse come into any big sum of money when you were living in that apartment?"

She laughed for the first time. "We could have used some money. Hell, no!"

Murdock drummed on the table top with his fingers. "Who was the man who was killed?"

"Why should I tell you anything?"

"If you don't I'll see that you get asked officially."

"That's clear enough. Wilse worked for the slot machine syndicate. The dead guy was a Bronx candy store man with a row of machines in the back room. He got tight and busted the machines and took the dough. Then he tried to squeak out of making the loss good by pulling in the law."

"Who runs the syndicate?"

"Mister, you really don't know, do you? Andrew Morris Lorz. Check the phone book."

"Who had the run of the apartment besides you and Wilse?"

"Some of the boys. Steen's friends." She looked at him and said in a flat, dull tone, "Steen liked to take care of his friends."

"Did anybody ever hide there? From the law?"

"Once I had to move out for three days while a man hid there. Steen called him Arnie. I don't know who or what he was hiding from."

"Steen would know?"

"I guess so."

"You ever see Arnie since that time?"

"No."

THE opaque glass panel in the door bore the inscription: LORZ TRADING COMPANY—A. M. LORZ, PRESIDENT. On the back of his card Murdock scribbled, "Concerning Wilse."

The girl took it in, came back and held the door open with a professional smile. "This way, Mr. Murdock."

Andrew Lorz was in the full flower of his fifties. He was tall, bronzed, with the air of a British country gentleman. He wore tweedy clothes, smoked a hand-carved pipe and ignored the lock of white hair that fell across his unlined forehead.

"Sit down, Mr. Murdock. You intrigue me a bit. Steen Wilse—and he is the only Wilse I know—worked for an acquaintance. He was a rather little specimen and he got into some sort of police trouble. He was killed in Auburn prison about a year ago. So what could you possibly have to say to me about him?"

The office was severely paneled. Two hunting prints, framed with wide mats, hung on either side of the big window behind Lorz.

"Killed?"

"Why yes. Is that a blow to you? Knifed, I believe. In the washroom"

"Who did it?"

"They never did find out. Kindly state your business, Mr. Murdock."

"Did this—this acquaintance of yours happen to lose something valuable a few years ago? Before Wilse was convicted?"

Andrew Lorz inspected the inside of the bowl of his pipe, knocked out the ashes into a massive bronze ashtray, set the pipe carefully in a rack. His smile was charming.

"My dear Mr. Murdock. My acquaintance is in rather a risky, though profitable line of business. He has continual losses. Part of his business involves the transportation of large sums of money. I vaguely remember his mentioning a rather unfortunate loss during the period you mention." The mild voice hardened. "Of course, my friend would go to almost any effort to recoup that loss."

"Your friend couldn't find out who was responsible for the loss?"

"No. A shipment, when it arrived at destination was found to contain newspaper, cut to resemble bundles of currency. However he did determine that Wilse could not have been responsible. Various other members of his organization were under suspicion and, to avoid further loss, he dismissed the entire group. There were nine of them."

Murdock lit a cigarette, using a silver desk lighter. "But your friend kept an eye on the nine men?"

"You have a good business mind, Mr. Murdock. Yes." Lorz tilted back in his chair, laced his fingers across a flat stomach and stared dreamily at the ceiling. "Yes, and my friend was waiting for just this sort of a break. He will be grateful for my putting him on the trail of his lost money."

"What trail? I haven't told you anything?"

"Ah, but you have! Permit me to explain. You have made a definite connection between Wilse and the money. Thus I assume that Wilse was in on it in some way. Either he knew who did it, or he helped hide the loot. That supplies motive. Personal gain is a very strong motive, Mr. Murdock. All my friend needs do at this point is find out which of the nine suspects were in Auburn Prison at the time Wilse was—ah—dealt out of the pot."

"The police would be equally interested in Arnie."

Lorz maintained his position but the long body seemed to stiffen and for a moment he stopped breathing. Then he said softly, "You distress me, Mr. Murdock. The implication is clear. Arnold Evart disappeared shortly after the theft. My friend was suspicious of him, but lost his suspicion when Evart was captured in a clumsy armed robbery. I—my friend underestimated Arnold Evart. Obviously he planned to be captured. My friend thought that Evart was trying to branch out on his own. We now have a stalemate. If I refuse to cooperate with you, you will have Arnold picked up on suspicion of murder. Given a clue the police may find the hiding place and neither of us profit. What are your terms?"

Murdock stood up. His lips felt stiff as he smiled. "I'll think it over."

"It might be a rather grave mistake to become too greedy, Mr. Murdock. Good day."

The girl gave Murdock a crisp smile as he walked out.

CHAPTER THREE

Death in the Flames

THE warrant was presented to the owners and the police obtained the necessary permission for the search. Every technique of modern search methods was employed by the department experts. And, in the end, when nothing was found, when it was time for the plasterers and paper hangers to be called in to repair the damage, the lieutenant, who looked much like a bank clerk with a troublesome ulcer, sat across from Jane Lurner and Mitchel Murdock and said, "The theory was very interesting, folks. But it didn't wash. We'll have to release Evart. We can't even prove he was in the city at the time of Miss Selka's death. We've been unable to crack through his guard."

"But it all makes sense!" Murdock protested. "The money has to be hidden here."

The lieutenant smiled sadly. "But it isn't. I'll vouch for that."

"How much longer will Miss Lurner receive police protection?"

"That's what I wanted to bring up. No threat has been made for some time. I'm having the men taken off as of today."

Murdock glanced at Jane. She looked pale but composed. The lieutenant said hurriedly, "Of course, we expect you to use normal precautions, Miss Lurner. I wouldn't advise any midnight walks in the park. You're positive that you never saw Evart hanging around here?"

"Positive," Jane said. Evart had been in the line-up. Not one of the men had looked familiar to either Jane or Murdock. They had been told which one was Evart, after they had confessed that none of the men looked familiar.

Evart was a broad-shouldered man in his early thirties, not tall, with a wide, heavy face, weak-looking eyes and pale, silky hair worn rather long, brushed straight back. His cheeks were pitted with the old scars of adolescent acne and his expression was one of stolid indifference.

"Will Lorz dare do anything about Evart once you release him?"

"It wouldn't be Lorz. It would be someone working for him, and we'd never be able to prove the connection. If Evart did take the cash and hide it, Lorz will have some way to make him talk. It won't be a nice way and it won't be a way that we could use."

"Will you try to tail Evart when you release him?"

The lieutenant smiled, said, "Those boys can make the tail and lose him in the first fifteen minutes in this town. If every building had one exit and there weren't any subways, we'd still have trouble."

Three hours later Jane sat in the tiny kitchen listlessly stirring another cup of coffee. Murdock, his tie loosened, paced back and forth.

"They've let him go by now," Jane said. "We had such lovely assumptions and they worked out so perfectly—right up until the final one."

"There are some more assumptions to be made," Murdock said quietly. "We've got to back-track. One thing we've never considered is why Evart, if he's the one, didn't wait until both you and Rocky were out and then break in here and take his money."

She looked startled. "I never thought of that!"

"There's one answer. The money is hidden in such a way that it takes a long time to get at it. Longer than a few hours."

"In a few hours a man could tear down the walls in the place with a pry bar."

"That's what gets me."

Murdock paced for a few more minutes. When he glanced at Jane he saw that she had an odd expression on her face.

"What is it?"

"Mitchel, what good would it do Evart if he did force Rocky and me to leave? I mean how could he tell that the rental agency wouldn't put somebody else right in here? Wouldn't he have to have some sort of a priority to move in?"

Murdock stared at her for long moments and then snapped his fingers. "Good girl! Wonderful girl."

THE oddly dusty girl with the long white throat grinned at Murdock. "The sleuth returns. Want to make some more bets?" The grin died when she saw the look on Murdock's face.

"Could you be completely honest with me if by helping me you would be nailing the man who carved up Miss Selka?"

She stood up with a surprisingly graceful movement and walked to the window. After a few moments she turned around.

"Yes, if by being honest with you I don't lose my job here."

"Is your boss in on the bribes?"

"He doesn't know they exist. How can a man be so naive?"

"How does it work?"

"Usually the clients try to get the janitor. In this outfit we call him a superintendent. I control the files and waiting lists. The janitor tells the client to see me when I leave the office for lunch. The bite is usually three months' rent. Call it five hundred bucks for the place Selka had. I have to split it even with the janitor. How did you guess?"

"It had to be this way. And the deal was all set with somebody to take over the Selka apartment as soon as Miss Lurner vacated?"

"That's right. Gosh, I thought it funny that the guy insisted on that particular apartment. But who am I to quarrel with two hundred and fifty bucks?"

"Did it work the usual way?"

She frowned. "Not quite. This time it was a phone call, which I didn't like. He told me that Charlie, that's the janitor, told him to contact me. He already knew the size of the bite so I knew he'd seen Charlie. He said that he'd know when the apartment was vacated and he would be around. He told me not to sell it to a higher bidder or he'd blow the whole deal up in my face."

"How did he sound?"

"Very cold and very tough. Say, is he the one?"

Murdock felt no doubt. He nodded. "He's the one."

CHARLIE rolled the cigar butt to the far corner of his mouth, took it out and spat onto the concrete floor in front of the boilers. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Look. The girl at the rental agency told me. I'm covering her and I'll cover you too. But if you won't play, I'll talk in the right spot and you'll be out of a job. Getting fat off the apartment shortage isn't my idea of a nice clean business. And the more you play coy the closer you get wound up in a very nasty murder mess."

"Who are you?"

"Just a friend of Miss Lurner's. I'm not a cop."

Charlie spat again. "Okay, fella. I got it over the phone. I told the guy that he had me wrong. He told me to cut out the kidding, that he happened to know that I'd steered a friend of his right. A certain Mr. Wilse. I remembered Wilse. I asked him what Wilse said he paid. He gave me the right figure. That was before we raised our rates. So I told him where to go and who to see and how to tell it was her when she came out to go to lunch."

Murdock cursed softly. Evart had been too clever. He hadn't given either the girl or the janitor a chance to identify him.

Charlie said, "The police sure made a mess of that apartment. The men'll be around to go to work in a day or two."

"That's dandy!" Murdock said bitterly.

He went up and told Jane.

By then they guessed that Evart had been free for fifteen hours or more. They wondered if Lorz had picked him up.

As they were conjecturing, there was a knock at the door. Murdock went to the door. It was eleven o'clock in the morning. "Who is it?" he called.

"The paperhangers, mister," a voice said.

Murdock opened the door for them. The first one was in coveralls, carrying brushes and a pail. The second one came in, carrying a stepladder in front of him. The second one kicked the door shut after he got in.

"They came sooner than the janitor said," Jane said.

"Surprise," Murdock said.

"That's right. Surprise!" the man who

had carried in the ladder said softly. The ladder had shielded his face.

He had a wide, heavy face, pocked with scars. He was broad and not tall. The gun he held had a crude silencer affixed to the barrel.

The man who had carried the pail and brushes stared at Evart with his mouth open. "Hey, what is this?" he demanded. "You said that we were going—"

The gun swiveled and made an explosive sound, no louder than a clap of hands. The pail banged to the floor. The heavy thud of the slug against flesh and bone was clearly audible. It tilted the man's head back at a crazy angle. The neat hole was just above his right eye and a bit ragged. He fell face down, his chest hitting the pail. It threw his body to one side and he rolled onto his back, one hand against the white brick fireplace.

Jane moaned deep in her throat and silently slid off the chair.

Evart's stolid expression slipped and Murdock saw the madness underneath. Evart's face had a greyish look. He stared at Jane. "Good. She'll keep. I need her to answer the phone and the door. But I don't need you, brother. You made me a little trouble."

He aimed the gun. Murdock moved quickly, but a bullet moves quicker than any man can.

Murdock felt as though a white-hot poker had been jammed through him. The bullet hit his flesh with the stunning impact of a hammer blow. It hit just above his belt buckle and slanted through him at a slight and sickening downward angle.

He was thinking, *This can't happen to me! This is what happens to other people. Not to me. . . .*

And yet it had happened. He knelt, sitting on his heels, his arms locked across the front of him, trying to compress the screaming pain and he knew that his mouth was open in a wordless shout.

EVART seemed to drift toward him. Suddenly Murdock was on his back, and he knew that he had been kicked in the face, though the pain in his middle had made it impossible for him to feel any lesser pain. Fragments of broken teeth were against his tongue and warmth ran down his cheek from the corner of his mouth. Evart laughed in the remote distance. A laugh without humor.

The script is wrong! Murdock thought in panic. *I'm cast as the hero. They never kill the hero. . . .* But this was reality beyond all scripts and all treatments. The world contracted to a white glow of agony that flamed within him. There was no more room in his mind to think of how everything had gone wrong. He was too busy pushing against the pain that tried to force him down into darkness.

He got his right hand under his belt, the heel of his palm pushing hard against the place where the bullet had entered. It eased the pain a little. There seemed to be a warm flowing within him, a liquid merging.

He opened his eyes and fought away the mists, squinting to see clearly. Evart stood over him. "Good morning. How do you like it?"

"You—killed—Rocky!" Murdock said, spacing each word, mouthing it distantly around his broken teeth.

"Rocky was greedy, pal. She wouldn't move. And I need that dough. I need it fast. I got to take a long look at South America. And there's nobody I have to split with. Not with Wilse buried. Don't fret, pal. I'll leave your girl friend right beside you when I leave."

Murdock heard the ringing of the phone. It sounded remote. Then Evart moved away and he heard the slap of the killer's hard hand against Jane's cheek.

"Rise and shine, baby. Come on. On your feet. Yeah, the boy friend's got a

hole in his tummy. You get on that phone and brush off whoever's calling or I give your pal one in the head. You wouldn't like that now, would you?"

They were out of Evart's range of vision. The telephone was in the small entryway. Murdock took a match folder out of his pocket, then clamped the matches between his broken teeth.

With his left hand he pushed hard against the floor and managed to roll onto his side. The nearest couch was three feet from his head. On the same level as his eyes he could see the inert feet of the man Evart had killed.

With ponderous haste, moving like a half-smashed beetle, Mitchel Murdock inched along the floor until his face was six inches from the couch. He knew that if he took his right hand from under his belt he would faint. He held the match folder between his teeth as he wrenched off the paper match. The third time he tried, it lit. Someone was holding the match. It didn't look like his own hand and it obeyed the orders of his brain with a faltering slowness that awoke a dull fury within him.

The flame, inches from his face, lengthened when he held the match close to the tailored skirt of the couch. The fibers curled and blackened and he began to smell the stench of them.

As soon as the flame would support itself, he moved the match to another place a foot away. His arm trembled. He began to feel the heat of the flame near his face.

Murdock was holding the second match against the surface of the rug when he heard the hoarse shout.

Smoke was beginning to roll up toward the ceiling.

Evart kicked him out of the way with such force that Murdock rolled over twice, ending on his back.

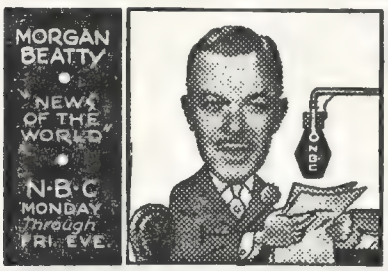
He turned his head and saw Evart rushing from the kitchen with the pitcher of water. He also saw the pale flash of Jane's arms as she lunged at him, as she struck the pitcher out of his hands.

Evart struck her in the face with his fist, picked up the unbroken pitcher and ran back to the kitchen. Murdock heard him cough.

Inch by inch Murdock moved over to where Jane lay. The fire was hot against his back. He covered her, a human shield against the flame, and consciousness dropped from him as though a dim light had been flicked out. . . .

HE FLOATED up through thinner and thinner layers, bursting at last into the open air. The light stung his eyes and for a time he could make out only dim and fuzzy outlines. He squinted and saw Jane. She was asleep.

He moved one hand toward her and it didn't look like a hand. It was swathed



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in white. Nevertheless, he touched her hair. It was only when she sat up abruptly that he realized she was sitting in a low chair beside a bed, and that he was in the bed.

"Don't try to talk," she said. Her eyes were moist. She smiled. "I can guess what you'll be thinking and wanting to ask. You had six intestinal perforations. They've sewed you up. You have second degree burns on your back and arms and legs. They've filled you full of plasma. And you'll be needing new teeth. Other than that, my darling, you're as good as new. Engineers must be durable.

"One of the policemen had a hunch. On his off-time he came around to look over the apartment. He was the thin policeman you met that first night you brought me home. He saw the smoke. Evart tried to shoot it out with him, but he got a bullet in the lung and came back into the apartment. Evart went into the kitchen. The fire got him."

"The money?" he asked weakly.

"The police still insist it isn't there. They think someone found it and took it."

"Wrong—"

"Please don't try to talk. I'm going to tell the nurse you're awake."

"Wait!"

She tilted her ear to one side, a familiar, questioning gesture.

"Tired. Want to sleep. Awake a little while in the night. Thinking. Police looked in chimney, under fire bricks. What would take a long time to get at? Front of the fireplace is painted white. Had three days to hide money. Smuggle in bricks and cement. Make a double wall! Money flat between two layers of bricks. Got to be there."

His voice faded. Sleep was warm arms that reached up to pull him down into secret depths. He had time for one more statement. "Either Wilse or Evart was a bricklayer once. Find out—"

Murdock walked with the peculiar careful gait of a man who has been ill a long time. But when he saw Jane waiting for him at the table for two he quickened his step.

He sat down with a sigh. "Hello, heiress!"

She shivered. "We made our money the hard way, pal. And if Lorz and company could have dreamed up any legal way to lay claim to it, we wouldn't have a dime."

"Don't you want to hear how I made out with Mr. Beem?"

"I was afraid to ask."

Murdock smiled. "Mr. Beem followed the account very carefully in the newspapers. He feels that the whole affair shows a certain amount of—shall we say rashness? Anyway, too adventurous an outlook for their staid firm."

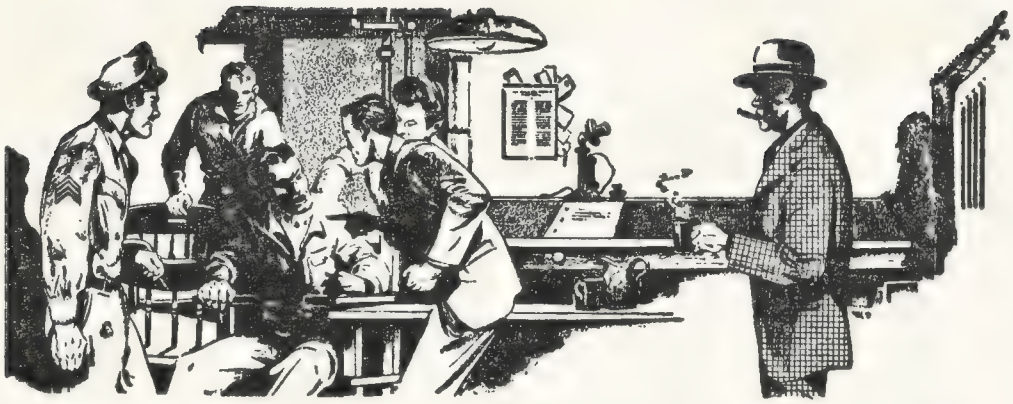
"But what on earth will you do?"

Murdock put his fingertips together and imitated Beem's dry tone. "However, Mr. Murdock, during your—ah—unavoidable seige in the hospital, the Norris firm adopted some of your suggestions. They—ah—found them practical. They have indicated to me that if we will release you so that they can employ you, they will not cancel the contract they have with us. So, my boy,we are—ha-ha—more or less at your mercy." His tone changed and he leaned toward her. "And how did you make out, Jane?"

"*City* wants me to come back and help them be snide."

"I'll be in Endicott, Michigan from now on, I guess. That's a little more than a sleeper jump from here. The magazine — they have branch offices — I was wondering—" He stopped in obvious confusion.

She seemed infected by the same confusion. She twisted her glass around and around. They avoided looking at each other. "I could probably hit them for the transfer in about three months," she said in a small, happy voice.



THE THIRD DEGREE

By Hallack McCord

(Answers on page 73)

TODAY'S scientific detective has to have a wealth of knowledge about everything from crook psychology to the reactions of various poisons. To determine how good a detective you'd make, test yourself on the twenty quiz questions listed below. If you can answer eighteen or more of them correctly, chances are you'd make an excellent sleuth. Answer sixteen or seventeen, and you're still good. But answer fewer than fifteen, and you're crowding into the rookie cop class.

1. "Madjoon" is: A type of liquor distilled by the inmates of certain prisons? A crook's name for a stiff jail sentence? A compound of the drug, hashish, designed for chewing?

2. True or false? The "hyoscine cure" is a form of punishment given out by criminals to those who have betrayed them.

3. True or false? The users of the drug, hashish, are notorious for the fact that they virtually never commit murders.

4. What is a "bindle stiff"?

5. True or false? "Bird's eye" is the crook slang term for a package of adulterated morphine.

6. Is the person known as a "wire" generally popular with convicts?

7. If a convict of yours told you you were "woody." would you be: Angry? Delighted?

8. What is the meaning of the crook slang term "velvet"?

9. True or false? The underworld slang term "weeping and waiting" is used in reference to an individual who is in jail, but is constantly hoping to be released.

10. If a crook friend of yours told you over the phone that he had just been "skinned," you would know: He had just had his head shaved? He had just taken a bath? He had just rented a safety deposit box and placed all his money in it?

11. True or false? In the slanguage of the underworld, a "slap man" is a plain clothes detective.

12. Of what use is a "rapper" to a criminal who is on trial?

13. If an underworld acquaintance of yours told you he was going to a "rest house," what would you think he meant?

14. True or false? In the vernacular ot the underworld, a "patterer" is a very young crook.

15. According to the crook's way of thinking, what do the initials "P.A." stand for?

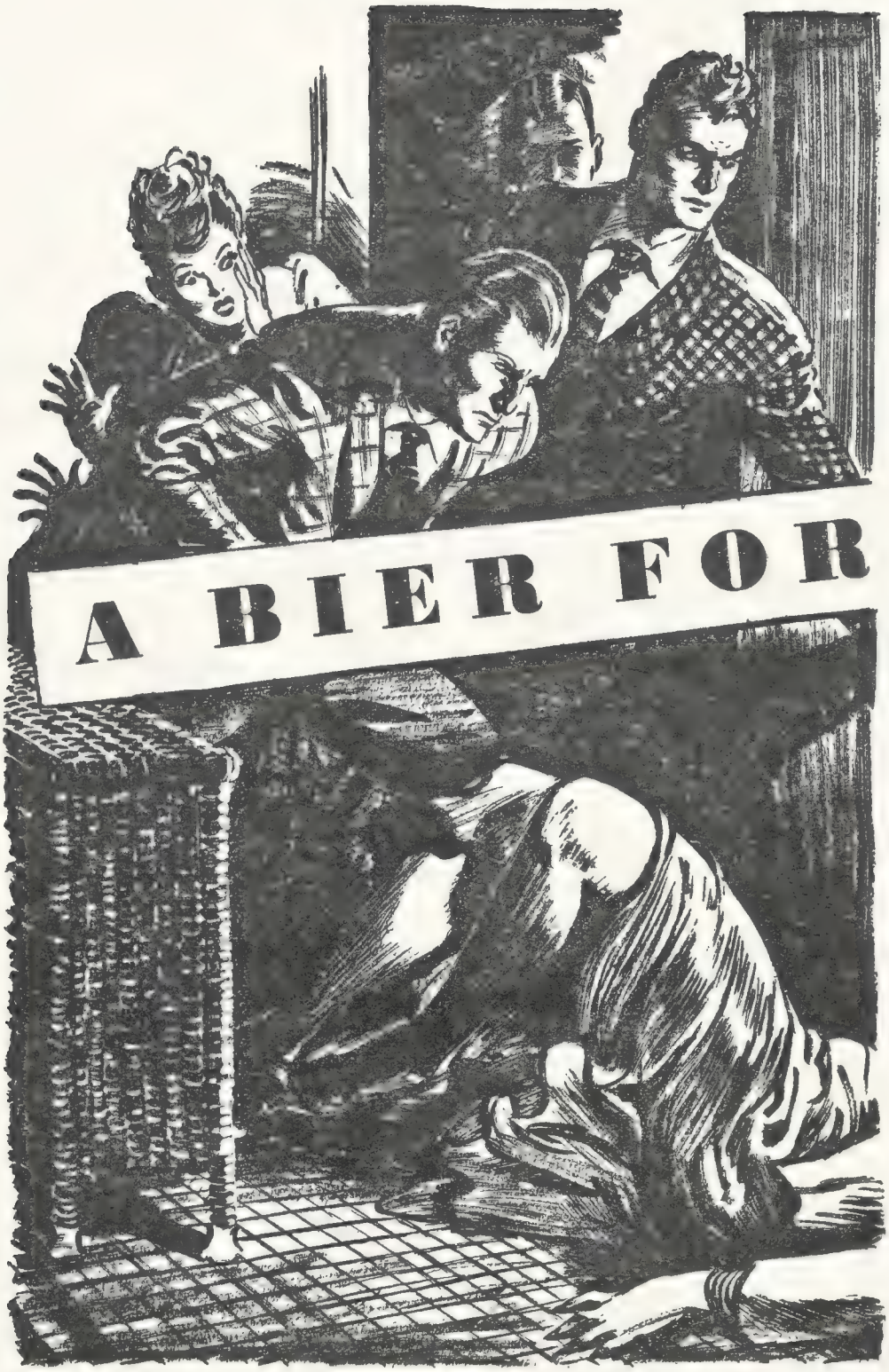
16. If you overheard a gang of crooks conversing about "losing their lighthouse," what would you think they meant?

17. True or false? In underworldese, the term, "law" is sometimes used synonymously with "prison guard."

18. True or false? A "hemper widow" is a crook who makes a specialty of robbing women.

19. True or false. "Hook" is a slang term sometimes used by criminals in reference to a razor.

20. If a man is said to be "hinkty," he is: On the level? Looking for a fight? Suspicious about something?


A BIER FOR

MEAN BABY

On the tile floor lay Myrtle's body. Her sweater was red with blood. . . .

She was a lot of corpse, I was a lot of cop. We had our memories—and one other thing in common —too much killer!

CHAPTER ONE

Death at Robber's Roost

I'D BEEN there two days. I'd seen the "Miracle Mile" on Wilshire and the U.C.L.A. campus. At the Brentwood Country Club, I had shot a respectable (for me) ninety-two. I had seen one movie star, whose name I couldn't recall. But I hadn't seen anyone I knew. I'd driven out alone in the Dusy, because I thought I needed the sun. What I needed most of all was company, being by nature a gregarious animal.

It was in this pensive mood, on Thursday morning, that I sat in a spot called Ben's Badger Bar, talking to Ben, who owned the joint. Ben's from some small town in Wisconsin, and he likes to dwell on the glories of that great state. But he stays in Santa Monica, just the same. Can't leave the business, he explains. California seems to have a certain resemblance to the army, that is, everyone

By William Campbell Gault

complains when they're in it, but cherish it in their memories.

"I miss the snow," Ben was telling me this morning. "I miss the old pepper a guy gets when that mercury drops. Used to be quite a skater, back home."

I said they were skating, right now, not seventy-five miles from here, but Ben shook his head. "It's not the same," he said.

I never did find out why it wasn't the same. For, at that moment, a feminine voice behind me said, "Mortimer Jones, as I live and breathe."

I turned in happy expectation, to see who this was, living and breathing behind me. It was Myrtle Jessup.

Back in my town, Myrtle had helped me from time to time, for pay. Myrtle sold information. In the trade, she's known as a stool pigeon, and held in contempt by many. But I liked her.

She hadn't seemed to age any, either above or below the neck. She was wearing a suit of some delicate green. She had on, in lieu of a blouse, a turtleneck sweater of fine cashmere. Myrtle does all right by a sweater.

"It's been a long time, Myrt," I said, "but time has been kind to you."

"And you, Jonesy." She shook her head. "How's the big town?"

"Full of snow when I left," I told her. I was studying her all the while, the tight blonde curls, the warm brown eyes, the full mouth, now smiling.

"Do you still drive that Duesenberg?"

I nodded, and asked, "How's Sam?"

She looked at me queerly for a moment. "Sam—you mean Sam Whitnall?" And then, without waiting for a reply: "We're divorced, Jonesy. Over a year ago."

"I didn't know that," I said. "I'm sorry, Myrt. I thought Sam was strictly for you."

"So did I," she said. "When are you going to offer me a drink?"

She's a woman of rare discrimination; she drank rye, just like yours truly. She'd finished the first, and was studying the second, when she said, "Still in business, same business?"

"That's right. Though not out here. This is a vacation, the first in three years."

"You mean, if I put you in the way of a job, an easy, well-paying job that wouldn't take more than an hour, you'd refuse it?"

"I might," I said. "It would depend upon the pay, of course."

"You haven't changed," she said. "Well, we won't talk about it now. There is a chance that I won't need you."

So we talked of other things, and Ben joined in, after a while. It was surprising how the time slid by. I had more rye than I can comfortably handle; that I know. But how it happened that Myrtle and I wound up at that party, I will never know.

I don't even remember the trip over, though we must have gone in the Dusy. I do remember the redhead, though. She was the first thing I noticed.

There were six men there, and four women. Outside of the redhead, I didn't pay much attention to the women. And when I saw who the host was, I thought maybe Myrtle had exceeded the bounds of good taste. The host was Sam Whitnall.

He seemed surprised to see us, but not in any way annoyed. "I didn't know you were in town, Mort," he said. "Settling out here?"

"Just a trip," I told him. The last time I'd seen Sam, we'd been on opposite sides of the fence, but his face showed no animosity now.

"Welcome to Robber's Roost," he said. Then, as Myrtle passed into the living room, leaving us at the door: "Myrt isn't planning any trouble, is she? This is the

first I've seen her, since the divorce."

"I couldn't guarantee anything, Sam," I said. "I met her in a bar. And now I'm here, and don't remember getting here. If you think she's got any ideas, that way, we could buzz right along."

"Hell, no," he said. "I should be able to handle anything she can start."

It was a remark I was to remember later.

We went into a living room longer than it was wide and it was wider than any I'd seen before. The ten people already there seemed lost in it.

But it couldn't hide the redhead.

She was standing near the piano, watching the gent who was hammering out some boogie. She had a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other, like one of those old John Held, Jr. cartoons. She had more curves than you're likely to get in a cartoon, though.

"Some girl, huh?" Sam said.

"Some girl," I agreed.

"Mine," Sam said, "all mine."

I had another of those alcoholic lapses, after that; the next thing I remember was sitting on a davenport with the redhead. Myrt was dancing with some gent even shorter than she was, and she's fairly short.

The redhead's name, I'd learned, was Rita, Rita Regan, and she'd come to this town to get into pictures. "But you know how those things are," she said.

I didn't, but I nodded sagely, being in a sagely nodding mood.

"And then I met Sam," she went on, "and I've been on the merry-go-round ever since." Some bitterness in the voice, now? "Sam acts as though he owns me. There are times—" She shook her head.

"Sam seems to be doing all right," I said.

"Past tense, you mean," she said. "He did all right. He's in a position now where he doesn't have to do anything. Though I suppose doing nothing would be called doing all right? Do you think so?"

"It's too involved for my present state of mind," I answered. "Couldn't we talk about something less complicated?"

"Well," she said, "what?"

"Well—you."

"There isn't much. I'm from Grand Forks. Do you know where Grand Forks is?"

"One of the Dakotas."

She nodded. "North Dakota. About twenty-thousand hard-working citizens, really a nice town. I was an innocent girl, of course, but possessed of certain charms, and the town seemed a little small to me. So I saved my money, and went to Chicago."

The story went on from there, through hat check girl, modeling, chorus, right up to Hollywood—and Sam. Sam she'd met at the home of one of the town's small producers. Sam hadn't given her a moment's rest since.

"I can't say that I blame him for that," I told her. "If I'd met you first, you'd be getting even less rest."

"I'm blushing. And now, how about you, Mr. Jones? You're a detective, aren't you?"

"More or less."

"You don't look like a detective," she said.

"How do detectives look?"

"Oh, fat and dumb, or tall and broad-shouldered with wise cracks. Or slim and debonair, and sort of brilliant."

"Type casting," I said. "I am a private investigator, and the less I look like those types, the more private I'll be, and the more privacy, the more business."

"And the more business, the oftener you can come out here for vacations?"

"Well, roughly, yes.

"But you probably haven't as much money as Sam, have you?"

"Very probably not. Why?"

"I was thinking you'd be more fun. Sam is awfully boring, at times, and—"

But Sam was coming across the room toward us, now, and any further complaints she may have had were stilled. Sam had a pair of drinks in his hand, and he handed one to each of us.

He had a smile on his face, but it was purely facial. "Making time with my girl, eh, Mort? Isn't she a beauty?"

I agreed to that.

"Beauty like that would be wasted in pictures, wouldn't it, Mort?"

Marriage versus a career, I thought. *This is getting like a soap opera.* "I'm sure no type of picture, moving or still, could possibly do her justice," I said tactfully.

Sam sat down on the davenport—between us. "See, baby," he said. "Why don't you give up this pipe dream, like a sensible girl, and—"

HE NEVER finished the sentence. From behind us, at that second, came the muffled blast of what was certainly a gun.

Rita flinched. "Backfire?" she asked.

"That was no backfire," I said and looked at Sam.

"No," he said. "I'd bet on that. It came from the other room, or the hall, didn't it?"

"It sounded like a closed room to me," I said and stood up, as Sam got to his feet.

He nodded to me. "C'mon along."

The lad at the piano continued to play. Two couples who were dancing continued to dance. Rita stayed where she was, as Sam and I went to the front hall.

There was a dining room to the right here, and there was the door to the lavatory, right near the rear door. There was an acrid smell, and it seemed to come from the rear of this hall.

We went back toward the kitchen, but opposite the lavatory door, we both paused. The acrid odor was exceptionally strong, here.

The little gent who'd been dancing with Myrtle came out through the kitchen doorway. "What the hell was that racket?" he asked us.

It seemed like a delayed reaction to me. A girl came out through the same doorway and I saw the lipstick, now, on Shorty's collar.

For some reason all four of us were silent a moment, all four of us were looking with varying unease at the closed lavatory door.

It was Sam who tried the knob. The door swung open.

On the tile floor of this fair-sized room lay the body of Myrtle Jessup Whitnall. She was spread-eagled on that hard floor, and the entire upper half of her cashmere sweater was red with blood.

Sam said nothing, just stared. Shorty said, "Suicide. Why'n hell would she want to do a thing like that?"

There was no weapon in sight. There was a shoulder-high, casement window in the room, and the window was open.

"What makes you think it's suicide?" I asked Shorty.

His girl friend was already halfway to the floor when I turned to ask him that. She landed with a thud, before he even noticed her.

Lieutenant Duncan, out of homicide, was a big gent with a square face and soft, inquiring eyes. His voice was low and easy, but the brown eyes overlooked nothing. He'd talked to Sam and Rita, one at a time, in the kitchen. I was alone in there with him now.

"Private investigator, Mr. Jones?"

"That's right, Lieutenant."

"This the kind of company you keep in your home town, too?"

"Not often," I answered. "I knew this Mrs. Whitnall when she was Myrtle Jessup. I'd bought some information from her, a couple of times."

"A pigeon?"

"That's right."

"She hire you to come up here with her?"

"No, she didn't. I came here as a guest."

"Uh-huh. The department know you, personally, back East?"

"The Chief does. You could wire him. I worked out of homicide there for six years."

"Oh. You quit?"

"I quit. It was my own idea. I could go back to the department, any time."

Duncan's smile was wry. "Sure, only then you wouldn't be able to afford California vacations. Where were you, when you heard the shot, Jones?"

"On a davenport, in the living room, talking to Whitnall and Miss Regan."

"Who else was in the room, then?"

"Waterford was playing the piano, and two couples were dancing. I'm not sure of their names."

"Mmmm-hmmm. And this Ed Burrows?"

"He was in the kitchen, I think. Anyway he came out of there as Whitnall and I came out into the hall. That girl who fainted was in the kitchen with him. I'd say, offhand, they were otherwise occupied."

The brown eyes were mildly skeptical. "What gives you that idea?"

"Lipstick on his collar." I paused. "And that look people have."

Duncan said nothing for seconds, looking gravely thoughtful. Then he said, "Okay, Jones. Send in that Burrows. And hang around."

I went out and told Ed Burrows the lieutenant would see him next. Then I went over to sit next to Sam and Rita on the davenport.

Rita was pale, but under control. "Right back where we started from," she said. "Well, what did he have to say, Mr. Jones?"

"Just checking my background," I answered. "He seemed to think I was in bad company."

Sam was scowling, and my words didn't lighten the scowl any. Rita chuckled, and Sam said, "Cops. I don't like any cop, but I like a smart one least of all."

"He's smart enough," I said. "Who were the two gents who left, Sam?"

He looked at me suspiciously. "Why?"

"I'd say the rest of us are in the clear," I explained. "But Duncan's going to check those two very carefully."

Sam was looking at me steadily. "We'll let Duncan check 'em, if that's all right with you. You're not getting any ideas about playing cop, Jones?"

"I brought her here," I said. "I feel responsible, Sam."

I could almost feel him tense. Rita was smiling, and that probably angered him even more.

He said, "I'm in the clear on this. But my background isn't so right I'd want it

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dug into. I'm warning you, Jones, keep your nose clean."

"You know me better than that," I said. "You know me well enough to know I don't scare. And I'm not interested in your background. I'm only interested in what happened here, today."

Sam didn't say any more. But I didn't need a crystal ball to guess he and I weren't going to get along after this. He went over to talk to Waterford.

Rita was still smiling. "You like to play with fire, don't you, Mr. Jones?"

"It's a part of my trade," I told her.

She sighed. "It was refreshing, hearing someone talk back to Sam for a change. I'm getting awfully weary of that man." She stamped out her cigarette in an ashtray. "But he lives so well, so very, very well."

The short man, Ed Burrows, was coming out from the kitchen, now. He gestured to Waterford, then came over to where we sat.

He had a puzzled look on his face. "I think that cop's got me picked for the number one boy, you know that?"

"Imagine that," Rita said. "And why should he think that, Ed?"

"Because I was in the kitchen. And the kitchen opens up onto the back porch, and so does that bathroom where she was shot. But Babe was with me all the time, in the kitchen. He can't do nothing to me, can he, if Babe sticks with me?"

"I don't know," Rita said.

"I'm asking you, peeper," Burrows said.

He was sounding very tough for a man his size. I looked at him coolly. "No," I said, "there's nothing he can do, nothing but pinch you. The jury would do the rest."

Burrows' voice was rough. "Listen, Hawkshaw—"

It was Sam Whitnall who interrupted him. Sam, who had come up behind him, said, "Take it easy, Ed. This is no time for rough stuff." He paused, looking at me. "There'll be plenty of time for that, later."

Ed went over to talk to Babe, while Sam sat on the davenport again. He was smoking a cigar. He was staring out across the room, and saying nothing. Things were a little strained, to say the least.

Rita, for the first time, looked uncomfortable. I could imagine she'd have reason to fear Sam's wrath. I'd have reason, too. But in my trade it's best not to show any more fear than is absolutely necessary.

Back East, Sam had a reputation as a man to get along with. The one time I had gone up against him, it had been because of one of his lesser hoodlums, and he hadn't had enough at stake to make an issue of it. But we weren't friends, by any means.

The uniformed man at the door was talking to a newcomer, now, and it was clear the new man was another detective. He walked right through the room, and out into the kitchen.

Sam watched him idly, and then his gaze swung around to me. "Did Myrtle tell you just why she wanted to come up here?"

"Not that I remember. I don't even remember driving up here."

Sam looked more thoughtful than angry now. "You know, there isn't a soul here who'd have any motive for killing her. Not a soul but me." He shook his head.

"How about those two who left?"

"They don't even know her."

We didn't have any further dialogue after that. In a little while, Duncan came to tell me I was free to leave the place. "But stay in town," he added.

He was, for the moment, interested only in Sam, Ed Burrows and the girl called Babe. The rest of us were free to leave.

CHAPTER TWO

Two Lippy Punks

IT WAS just chance that Rita and I went out together. On the front porch she said, "You wouldn't be going my way, I suppose?"

"I'd be glad to take you anywhere," I said.

"It's not too far—Santa Monica."

"That's my neck of the woods," I told her.

"The Miramar," she said.

Which wasn't my neck of the woods by about ten dollars a day. The Dusy started with an appreciative murmur, and Rita said, "Even out here, you don't see many of these. What is it?"

"A Duesenberg. America's finest car. The world's finest, if you'll pardon a little boasting. It's an orphan, now."

"Nice," she said, and no more.

I cut down Hilgard to Lindbrook, took Lindbrook to Westwood Boulevard, and Westwood to Wilshire. Still, no words.

Out Wilshire, toward the sea. At Sepulveda a hot rod pulled up alongside, while we waited for the light. Couple of young fellows in it, and the lad next to the driver looked over to grin at me.

"I'll bet that was some stuff in 'thirty-two," he said.

I could feel the Dusy shiver. Sensitive, she is, and proud.

"It's some stuff now," I answered. "Where do you put the hay in that heap?"

"Huh," he said, and no more.

We watched the light. At the amber on the cross street, the hot rod edged forward a bit, but I think that's cheating. I was waiting for the green.

When it came, I went into low, and so did the hot rod. Tires squealed, and we hit the far side of Sepulveda hub and hub. He was right there, losing nothing, gaining nothing, as I went into second.

I hadn't gone a hundred feet in second before I knew I had him. I had thirty feet on him before I went into third.

I slowed then, and he pulled up alongside. They were both still grinning. The lad on my side said, "Okay, we live and learn. You wouldn't want to sell it, maybe? I know a guy would buy it, rich guy."

"My right arm I'll sell, first," I told him. "Nice job you boys built there."

"It's no Dusy," he said, "but for eight hundred smacks—"

They waved, and passed on.

Still no words from Rita.

"It's a nice day," I said. "Things are going to be all right. The way Myrtle operated, she was bound to get it, eventually. I liked her, and I feel sorry for what happened. But in her business there was always that possibility."

"I'm thinking about Sam," she said. "I'm thinking it wouldn't be very smart to be on the wrong side of Sam."

"I suppose not."

"Mort, he wants to marry me. I think I'm afraid to turn him down, now."

"And afraid to marry him, too?"

"Myrtle was married to him," she said.

"Myrtle was also a girl who'd risk plenty to make some money. She wasn't a girl to overlook an angle, and one of the angles finally caught up with her."

She shook her head impatiently. She was staring straight ahead. "All right. Let's just say I don't want to marry him. Let's just say I don't want anything to do with him, from now on."

"You didn't act like this back at the house," I pointed out.

"I was on guard, then. I realize, now, I've always been on my guard around Sam."

We were on Ocean Avenue, then, and I stopped in front of the Miramar. "I'll see you again, I hope," I said.

She smiled at me. "I'd like that. You're not afraid of Sam?"

"It's a considered risk." I smiled.

"But it'll be worth it. I'll call you."

She stood on the curb a moment, looking at me, one hand on the door. Finally she said, "Not that it matters, but I pay my own rent here."

She turned and walked off.

I drove back to Ben's Badger Bar. I was no longer drunk; the haze had left with the finding of Myrtle's body. But I was hungry and Ben advertised the best hamburger in town for only a quarter.

I had one of those, with some coffee. As I was finishing, Ben asked, "How was the party?"

"Not so good," I said. "How did you know I went to a party?"

"That dame called up, right from the phone on the wall, there. I couldn't miss her conversation, even if I tried."

"Who'd she talk to? Did you get the name?"

"Some guy named Ed. She asked for Sam, but this Ed must have told her Sam wouldn't talk. Weren't you listening?"

"I must have been drunker than I thought," I told him. "I didn't even see her leave the bar. Ben, do you think you could remember everything she said?"

He looked thoughtful. "Let's see. She called and asked for Sam. Then it seemed like this guy who answered the phone, this Ed, must have told her Sam wouldn't talk to her. Because she said, 'He'll talk to me, if I come out there. And I'm coming out there right now, Ed.' Then she slammed the receiver on the hook and came back to the bar."

"And what did she say to me?"

Ben's eyebrows went up. "She asked you how you'd like to go to a party, and you seemed to think that would be just dandy." Ben was frowning, now. "Something wrong, Mr. Jones?"

"The girl's dead now, Ben. She was killed at the party."

He was staring blankly. "Accident?"

"No. She was murdered."

"Holy smokes! That must have been some party!"

"It was. And I've got a hunch it's not over." I paid him and went out to the Dusy. I drove slowly back to Wilshire, to the auto court room-and-bath I was currently calling home.

It was a pleasant place, all things considered. I tried to read some magazines I'd bought. I turned on my portable radio, and poured myself a small snifter of rye.

I couldn't relax. I kept seeing Myrtle on that tile floor, the blood soaking her sweater. I kept seeing little Ed Burrows coming out of the kitchen, and that empty-faced blonde he'd been mugging.

The back porch would have been a logical place for the killer to stand. The kitchen door led out to the porch.

I wondered if Duncan had found the weapon. He looked like the kind of gent who'd take the house apart in the search for it. If those two who left had nothing to do with the murder, the weapon would have to be somewhere in that house or on the grounds.

My thoughts went to Myrtle, the dead pigeon, and I realized she'd probably never have gone up to that robbers' roost if I hadn't been along. Myrtle, for some reason, had always considered me a kind of modern Galahad.

It she'd gone up there for purposes of blackmail, it was possible Sam wasn't the intended victim. Sam's friends would be equally vulnerable, unless he'd changed social levels along with his address. Taking Ed Burrows as a sample, this seemed unlikely.

That included six men and four women, outside of Sam. I know the piano player by name only. I knew Ed Burrows and the first name of his girl friend, if Babe can be called a name. Which left four men and two women about whom I knew nothing, not even their names.

But Duncan had them all catalogued by

now, and this was really Duncan's baby, and no particular concern of mine.

I had almost put it from my mind, when the proprietor of my modest home came to tell me I was wanted on the phone in the office.

It was Lieutenant Duncan. "I'm still over at the Whitnall place," he said. "I'd like to have you drop over."

It didn't sound like an order. There was, as a matter of fact, a certain deference in his voice. It is something no private operative expects from a police officer, and I wondered what had prompted it.

I was there in ten minutes. He was waiting on the porch with the other detective. The uniformed man was gone.

"We got a report in answer to our wire, Jones," he said. "You seem to be well thought of, back there."

I couldn't think of anything to say to that.

"This is Sergeant Chopko," Duncan said. "He'll be on this case. With about ninety murders a year in this town, I don't know how much time he can give it. But I'd appreciate your cooperation."

I shook the hand Chopko extended. It was a big hand, and he was a big man, a man of about fifty with an unlined face and pale blue eyes.

For some reason, I didn't think we were going to get along.

Duncan said to him, "I'll be at headquarters. Check those two who left the shindig early. I'll hold Whitnall and Burrows and that girl as long as I can down there." He turned to me. "Like to ride along with Chopko? Maybe seeing those two guys will help to jog your memory."

His face was deadpan, and I couldn't tell whether the remark about my memory was malicious or not.

"I'd like to," I answered.

We went in a department car; I left the Dusy there.

"WE'LL go over to Venice, first, I guess," Chopko said. "That's where this Joe Gillespie lives." He didn't look at me as he said this. He looked like a kid who'd been chastised by teacher.

We'd driven all the way to Centinela, and he'd turned south on that before any more words came from him.

Then he said, "Twenty-eight years on the force." He shook his head. He didn't look at me.

"So—" I said.

"Twenty-eight years on the force," he repeated, "and I got to take a private eye along when I go to look up a couple punks."

"It wasn't my idea," I said. "All I wanted out here was the sun."

He didn't say any more. At Venice Boulevard he turned west, toward the ocean. There were a couple more turns after that, but no dialogue.

The alley we were on now was supposed to be a street, but bore no resemblance to one, though it was called Speedway. It should have been valuable property, because of its proximity to the water, but it looked like little more than a varied collection of shacks, crowded and decrepit.

Finally, he pulled into a small yard behind an ancient and paintless row of units that must have been small apartments. He climbed out, said, "Come along, if you want," and headed for the rear door of one of the units.

I came along. He had already pressed the bell button when I stepped up on the building-long porch. He'd had no response.

He stepped over to a window near the door and peered in. "Radio going in there," he said.

He came back, and this time he knocked on the door.

From inside, someone said, "Okay, okay, keep your shirt on."

Chopko's face stiffened, and he muttered something.

The door opened, and we were facing a man who looked no more than twenty-two years of age, a thin-lipped, brown-eyed young man of medium height and more than medium good looks. He was thin, but looked wiry. I'd seen him at the party, I remembered.

"The law," he called back over his shoulder, and then his gaze met Chopko's evenly. "Something on your mind, Sergeant?"

"Don't be smart, punk," Chopko said. "Your buddy here, too?"

"My buddy? Who do you mean?"

"Dartanian."

The youth nodded. "He the one you want to see?"

"I want to see you both, Gillespie. I'll do the talking. You can confine your end of the dialogue to answering my questions."

Joe Gillespie's smile was scornful. "Sure, Sergeant. Come in and relax."

We went into the main room of the unit, a living room that was obviously furnished by the management; the kind of furniture only a rooming house or apartment proprietor would pick. There was a small kitchenette visible from this room. There was an alcove off it that held a double bed and a narrow dresser.

In a grease-stained, worn-upholstered chair sat another young man I'd seen at the party, a stocky, swarthy youth in slacks and a bright yellow sport shirt.

He surveyed us gravely without getting up from his chair, without showing an emotion on his broad, placid face.

"How's the rug business, Dartanian?" Chopko asked.

The dark youth yawned. "Holding up, thanks, Sergeant. How are things with you?"

"I make a living. And not selling phoney oriental rugs, either."

No emotion on the Armenian's face. "You know anything about oriental rugs, Sergeant?"

"I'm not here for that," Chopko said. "I'm here to check on a party you boys were at this afternoon."

Joe Gillespie had taken a seat on the room's wicker davenport, and he entered the conversation, now. "That party at Sam Whitnall's, Sergeant?"

"That's the one. Which one of you boys left first?"

"We left together," Gillespie said.

"At what time?"

Gillespie shrugged. "Three, three-fifteen. I couldn't tell you much closer than that."

"You couldn't make it about three-thirty?"

Gillespie shook his head. "Like to oblige, Sergeant, but it wasn't that late. What's the trouble?"

Chopko ignored the question. "What makes you so sure about the time, Joe?"

Dartanian answered for him. "Because I had a customer I had to see at that time, Sergeant, over in Beverly Hills, and Joe went with me. She even remarked about how prompt we were."

Chopko smiled bleakly. "A customer, or a friend?"

"A customer," Dartanian answered evenly. "She bought a Royal Sarouk, Sergeant. You know what a Royal Sarouk is?"

"I'm not interested," Chopko said. "What's this customer's name?"

Dartanian made a ritual of taking a check from his pocket and scrutinizing it. Then he rose and brought it over to Chopko.

It was a check for fifteen hundred dollars, signed by a Cornelia Schultz. "A widow," Dartanian explained, and gave the sergeant her address.

Chopko's face was flushed, and his voice just a growl. "I hope, for your sake, this rug's as represented, Dartanian."

"I wish it wasn't," Dartanian said. "I

lost some money on the deal, Sergeant."

Gillespie said, "It wasn't the rug you came to see us about, was it?"

"No," Chopko said. "It was about a murder."

"Murder?" Gillespie asked.

Dartanian took his seat again in the worn chair. He said nothing, watching us both.

"Murder," Chopko repeated. "For a couple of punks, that's quite a step."

"It was just a party," Gillespie said. His voice seemed higher. "He's no particular friend of ours Sergeant. This Babe Norton's the one who told us about it. You know, Ed Burrows' girl."

Chopko transferred his attention to the stocky youth. "How long did it take you to peddle that rug?"

Dartanian shrugged. "I lose track of time on a deal. Hour, maybe."

"Maybe longer, too, huh?"

"Maybe. Why?"

"There's been a man waiting here for you to come home, right up to a half hour ago. Where'd you go after you sold the rug?"

"No place. Stopped at a drive-in, for a sandwich. That's all."

THERE weren't many questions aft- that. Chopko told them to go down to the station to make their statements, and we left.

Outside, he said, "Punks, smart, lippy punks. I'd like to work 'em both over, personally."

It was getting dark, and he turned the lights of the car on as we backed out of the yard.

"We get a worse record every year out here, and it's not because of the natives, either. It's these mugs from the East. We ought to have a quota."

I suppose he was talking to me, but he wasn't looking at me, so I couldn't be sure. "I'll be going home soon, Sergeant," I said.

"I wasn't talking about you," he said. "I'm talking about guys like Whitnall and Burrows and those two hoodlums."

We drove back to Westwood without any further conversation. When I got out of the car, I said, "Lieutenant Duncan's got my address. But I suppose he'll want me downtown to sign a statement?"

"That's right. Tomorrow morning. About eight."

Driving through the shopping district of the village, I saw this sign, CHARCOAL BROILED STEAKS, and it reminded me I hadn't eaten for nearly three hours.

While I was waiting for the steak to broil, I phoned Rita.

She sounded glad to hear my voice. "I was afraid it was Sam," she said.

"He hasn't phoned you?"

"Haven't heard a word."

"In that case," I suggested, "you should be free tonight."

"Available," she said, "but hardly free, Jonesy. This is an expensive town."

"So I've heard," I said. "Any special place in mind you'd like to go?"

A pause. "I have. I've a place I'd like you to see. Though you might be disappointed."

"Not if you're with me," I promised. "About eight-thirty all right?"

CHAPTER THREE

A Classy Clip-Joint

RITA was ready at eight-thirty. I wasn't ready for that much beauty, and I had to stare for a few moments before I found my voice. "You're wasting your time with Sam Whitnall," I told her finally. "You should be signed up just to stand around and be admired."

"You've been drinking," she said. "And I'm not wasting my time with Sam Whitnall any more, I hope."

We cut down to the beach road and headed up toward Malibu, at her directions. It was a bright night, and the ocean was living up to its name, serving as a scarcely moving mirror for the moon.

I could smell her perfume, mixed with the sea air.

"Anything new on the murder?" she asked.

"Nothing startling. I went over with the detective to see those two young angle-shooters. But their alibi is cast iron."

"I've been wondering about Ed Burrows," Rita said quietly. "I've been thinking he's about the only possible choice, isn't he?"

"Or Babe."

"Not that simpering—"

"With murder," I interrupted her, "you can never tell. Some of the meekest mice turn out to be the fiercest lions."

"Slow," she said. "It's only a few hundred feet now. Here it is."

It was a wide driveway leading to a beach home set about a hundred yards back from the road. The place was brilliantly lighted, and obviously no longer used as a private residence. About fifty yards up the drive there was a chain stretched between two concrete pillars, acting as a gate.

A man in a trim, grey uniform came over to my side of the car. "Membership card, sir?"

"It's all right, Len," Rita said to him. "He's a friend of mine."

The man touched his cap. "Sorry, Miss Regan. Didn't see you." He went to pull back the chain.

The drive went around to the back of the building, where the parking lot was filled with cars. Expensive cars, all of them, convertibles predominating.

A youth in a uniform matching that of the man at the gate took the car over here, and we went up onto the porch that spanned three sides of the building.

From here I could hear the music of a piano. The pianist was playing a piece I'd heard this afternoon at Sam's

Another man met us as we went into the lobby of the place, a man without a uniform, this time, wearing a dinner jacket.

"Miss Regan." He smiled at both of us. "You've come for dinner?"

She nodded and he led the way into a low-ceilinged, dimly lighted dining room, decorated in grey and green. On a stand in the center of this spacious room, Waterford was seated at the keyboard of a white-enameled concert grand piano.

It was a quiet place, well staffed and with the air of intelligent management. Soothing music from the piano, excellent service from the waiters, and good food.

"Very nice," I told Rita. "I can't see why you might think I'd be disappointed. Even on top of my recent steak, that lobster tasted good."

She smiled. "I thought it might be too quiet for you."

"That's the way I like it."

"I like it, too," she said. "And that's what I can't understand about it. It doesn't match Sam at all."

"Sam?" I said. "What's he got to do with it?"

"He owns the place. He runs it. With a manager's help, of course, but it was his idea."

I couldn't see it. Not for Sam Whitnall, who'd been in every racket that paid off, ever since I'd known him. I asked, "Is it really a private club, or is that gent at the gate just for show?"

"It's private. It's so private, members can't even bring guests. Some very big names in this town have been refused admission. And others, not so big, Sam has gone after. You figure it out. I've been trying to."

"I can't," I said. "But if he wants to go legitimate, we really shouldn't question him."

"Legitimate? I can't see him going legitimate, if it costs him money. If he figures his time worth anything at all, this place is a white elephant. And he's been running it for two years."

"It doesn't look like he's losing money tonight," I said.

"He doesn't usually have a crowd this large. Some nights, he may have only six or seven."

I looked around the room, and noticed one peculiar fact. There were no couples, here. There were no parties. Everybody was eating alone. If it was a social club, they weren't being social.

"You say this crowd is unusually large?"

"That's right. I think I know why, too. It's why I wanted to come out here, tonight. Usually, they come and go, you see. But tonight they're waiting for Sam."

A glimmer of something flickered in my brain. "They usually see him before they leave?"

"That's right. And tonight he isn't here." Rita was facing the entrance as she said this, and she added, "He wasn't here, I should say."

I TURNED to see Sam, Burrows and Babe standing in the wide entrance to the dining room. They were all looking our way. Then Sam went back into the lobby with Babe, and Ed Burrows was walking towards us.

One thing I'd noticed, all the occupants of the room seemed relieved to see Sam.

I didn't notice any more than that; Ed Burrows was blocking my vision now.

It was Rita he addressed, though. "Sam's awful mad, Red. You know we don't allow guests out here."

"I'm a guest myself," Rita said. "I'm no member, Ed."

"You're the only guest that's ever been in here, up to now," Ed said. "It's been all employees or members, up to now. And if you were going to bring a guest, you could've been a little more choosy."

"You're too small to talk like that, Ed," I said.

"Shut up," he said, without looking at me. And to Rita: "Sam wants to see you in his office."

She looked at me.

"Don't go if you don't want to," I told her.

Her smile was forced. "Don't worry. I can handle Sam."

She rose, and walked through the quiet room to the entrance. I was still standing when she disappeared. *The land of make-believe,* I thought, *the land of the false front, of the mirage, the land where money doesn't talk, it shouts.*

"Nice place you've got here," I said to Burrows.

He nodded. "Sam's awful proud of it. Let's go, Jones."

"The bounce?" I asked. "You're going to throw me out of this elegant and refined place, Ed?"

He shook his head. "I want to talk to you. Sam's got a proposition he wants me to give you."

"So long as it's legal," I told him, "I'm always open to a proposition."

I followed him through the dining room, and into the lobby. I was uneasy; I wasn't armed and didn't think it would do any good if I was. We went back along the lobby to a closed door, and Ed opened it.

Ed went through first and turned on the light. It was a small room, with a desk and file cabinet, with a door in the opposite wall that must have led out onto the porch.

"Now's all right," Ed said. He was facing me, but he was looking past me. I turned to see if there was anyone else in the room.

I got about halfway around when the roof caved in. I could feel myself going, and I fought it. Another part of the roof landed then. I don't even remember hitting the floor. . . .

About all I remember regarding that interlude was the flame and the sparks, and this damned drumming in my ears. The sparks went away after a while, but the drumming continued.

I woke to the sound of it; it was rain on the canvas top of the Dusy. A solid, steady rain without wind, a soaking rain.

I was sitting in the front seat; there was a man sitting next to me, behind the wheel. I was back at the auto court, parked in front of my unit. I could see, by the light of the court, that it was Joe Gillespie who'd driven me home.

From the back seat, a voice said, "He coming to, Joe?" It was Dartanian's voice.

"Mmmm-hmmm." Gillespie smiled at me in the dimness. "No hard feelings? Ed asked us to take you home. You must have had one too many, huh?"

"This is no time for bad humor," I said, and rubbed the back of my neck. "What time is it?"

"Eleven o'clock. You've been out for almost an hour." A pause. "You're alive, though. That's something."

"Don't scare me, boys. I've been in this business a long time, too long for that kind of talk to work. When you see Sam, tell him he made a mistake. Tell him he played it like an amateur."

"Sure," Dartanian answered. "Sam had a little message for you, too. He said he's got a nice clean business, and he doesn't want any trouble with you. Next time, Sam said, you won't be so lucky."

They were both climbing from the car now. Then they were running through the rain toward another car, whose headlights had just gone on.

I wondered who was waiting for them, there. It was an Olds sedan, and it pulled away, down the drive to the street, the moment they'd slammed the doors behind them.

My head was throbbing in rhythm to the beat of the rain. The Dusy was murmuring to herself, as her motor cooled. A light went on in a bathroom two units down, and a car went by on Wilshire, making time, its tires humming on the wet pavement.

I was more angry than scared, but I was scared some, too. Not only for myself, but for Rita, who was probably still out there. Then I remembered her smile when she'd said, "I can handle Sam," and I knew she could. She was no crossroads cutie; she'd been places and seen people, all kinds of places and all kinds of people.

I wouldn't have to worry too much about Rita. I could start worrying about myself. I wasn't getting paid to dig into the affairs of Sam Whitnall. Duncan didn't need me, and Chopko didn't want me. I was no amateur. I was a professional, and a professional who works without pay is of unsound mind.

I kept seeing Myrtle's blood-soaked sweater, though. I kept building up a peeve against Ed Burrows, and those two

punks who'd just put on the B-picture act.

I took the keys out of the ignition, and found my door key. Then I opened the car door quickly, and bolted for the protection of the porch.

The fast movement was rough on my head, and I moved more slowly after I was out of the rain. I'd been slugged before, but for more reason, and never while I was on vacation.

Inside, I took a hot shower, and got right to bed. There were a lot of questions in my mind, but I didn't want to seek any answers tonight. I was asleep almost immediately.

It was still raining in the morning. Not as heavily, but just as steadily. It was a gloomy, chill day. There was a radio blaring in the next unit. There was an Olds sedan coming into the courtyard.

It pulled up in front of the office, and I got my .38 out of one of my grips. I'd been bounced around too much in the past twenty-four hours to want any more.

I returned to the window in time to see who was getting out of the car. I put the gun back in my grip. It was a girl going into the manager's office, a girl in a green knit suit and white shoes, without stockings. It was Rita.

She left the office in a minute, and came walking up the porch toward my door. I had it open when she got there.

I was wearing a robe and pajamas and slippers. I needed a shave. But she smiled at me as though I were human.

"Bad night, Jonesy?"

"Bad enough. Come in."

She came in and sat in the room's only comfortable chair. I sat on the bed. She pulled a cigarette out, lighted it. She seemed to be stalling, framing some words in her mind.

Finally: "I'm sorry about last night, Jonesy."

"Not as sorry as I am. That your car out there?"

She shook her head slowly. "It's one of Sam's. Why?"

"Did you drive it last night?"

Again she shook her head. "Why all the questions, Jonesy?"

"Don't you think I have some answers coming?"

She shrugged. "I suppose. No profit in it for you, though, is there? That's what you work on, isn't it, profit? Revenge may be sweet, but it's not very profitable, is it?"

"That's three times you mentioned profit," I told her. "Don't tell me what's coming next."

The smile again. "I suppose this situation is nothing new to you."

"You suppose right. How much is Sam offering?"

"Not Sam. Me."

"You?" I took a breath. "I never would have thought it, Red."

"Sam offered me my big chance last night, Jonesy."

I laughed. "He's a producer now, huh?"

"There's a director who comes out there," she went on. "A brilliant man. A little erratic, but brilliant and well thought of at Mammoth. He can make me, Jonesy."

"Sam talked to him?"

"So did I." She was watching me intently. "It's a long way from Grand Forks. It's been a long, rough trip, with some detours. I'd hate to think it was in vain."

"Where do I enter this tableau?"

She paused, studying me. "You just forget where you were last night, and what happened. Forget about all of yesterday. Just go on and enjoy your vacation."

"I'd like to, Red," I said. "This director who's brilliant and erratic and well thought of at Mammoth. Is it opium he uses, or cocaine?"

She was rigid in her chair. Her voice

was very low. "You think that's what it's all about, out there? You think—"

"WHAT else? That's why Sam was so exclusive. Money wasn't enough. They had to be rich, and addicts, too. Beautiful front he's got there, and food good enough to make the place seem just what it was supposed to seem, a fine restaurant. Sam sold them the dope right from his office, and just the two of them knew of the transaction. I wouldn't be surprised if each member thought he was the only addict. He didn't want any of the riff-raff trade, just the ones who could control themselves. That's why he was so choosy."

"You're guessing at all this, Mort."

"Sure, sure. Maybe it's the lobster they come for. Maybe it's the piano playing. The law will find out, quick enough."

She didn't say anything for seconds. She was staring at the floor. Then she looked up to meet my gaze. "It's still not your business, is it?"

"No. It's something for the police."

"And you're going to them with this?"

"I haven't decided. You don't think I should?"

A pause. "No. Nothing's to be gained."

"And maybe a career would be lost?"

No answer from her.

"I should have known," I said. "I probably did know, but wouldn't let myself admit it. You're no child. You knew Sam Whitnall wasn't on the up and up. The first corruption is the hardest, Red. After that you can take it in increasing doses—until you'll accept murder."

Her voice was tight. "Mort! You don't have to say things like that. I had nothing to do with that murder."

"Maybe not. But you'll accept help from the man who did. This ambition can lead anywhere. Your ambition was your first corruption. I don't know how far beyond murder it can take you, if there is anything beyond murder. But there won't be any step you can't take if you take this one."

She was smiling now, a mocking smile. "If you will all open your hymn books to page twenty-three, we will sing—"

I got off the bed. My hands were shaking. I said, "Red, maybe you'd better leave. I just got up, and I've got a bad taste in my mouth. I don't want to feel any worse than I do. Go on back to your hoodlum friends, Red."

She stood up. "Don't make any decision in that frame of mind, Jonesy. Don't let your conscience lead you into something your pocketbook will regret, later."

I didn't look at her. "So long, Red."

"I'll be seeing you." The door closed.

It was still raining steadily. I watched her walk along the protected runway to her car. I watched her swing the Olds in a U-turn, the twin wipers working.

The land of make-believe, I thought. *The mirage, with sound effects. With sound effects— Of course, of course, that was it!*

I shaved, showered, and made some coffee on the gas plate. All the while I was doing this, I was thinking and realizing how stupid I'd been. Motive, means and opportunity. Something big enough for murder. Somebody capable of murder.

I drove down, after my coffee, to see Duncan.

Chopko was with him, in Duncan's office, and I gave a clerk my statement in there, and signed it. Then I said to Duncan, "I'd like to go out to that Whitnall house, again. There's something I overlooked."

Duncan looked at Chopko, and back at me. Chopko said, "This guy taking over the department's work? We all going to get laid off?"

Duncan kept his eyes on me. "You got an idea?"

"That's right."

He looked doubtful. But he was also looking thoughtful. "Is your car here?"

I nodded.

"Okay. You got out there with him, Mike, in his car. I'll be out, later, if the chief comes in in time."

Chopko nodded without saying anything, and we went out to my Dusy.

Chopko looked at it with some suspicion, but made no comment as he climbed in.

I moved out in low, goosing her, and he mumbled something.

I said, "No weapon, yet, huh?"

"No. She was shot with a thirty-two, but there wasn't even a thirty-two any place in the house. How we going to get in, out there?"

"Nobody home?"

"Wasn't, the last I heard. Had a man out there since seven-thirty."

"There'll probably be a window open, or something."

He just grunted in answer to that one. By the tone of his grunt, I guessed he didn't like the idea.

CHAPTER FOUR

Five Grand Final

ONCE I got on Wilshire, I made time. There was nobody in sight when I parked in front of the Whitnall home, and no cars in the drive. We went up and rang the front door bell.

There was no response. I said, "Let's go around in back."

We went around in back. Not a window was open, or unlocked. The back door, like most of those older houses, though, had the kind of lock practically any simple key can open.

Only I didn't have any simple key on my key ring.

Chopko watched me fumble around with my key ring for a while, and then shook his head. From his pocket, he took one of those dime store skeleton keys and slipped it into the keyhole.

It worked like a charm.

We went into the kitchen. I said, "I'd always taken it for granted that these California houses didn't have basements. This one has."

"So?" he said.

"I just wonder if there's a laundry chute in that lavatory, leading into the basement."

"There is."

"Let's take a look at it."

He followed me into the lavatory. The door to the laundry chute was open, and I looked into it. It didn't end flush with the top of the door; there were a couple more inches of chute above that, and a plywood roof to it.

There was a hole in the plywood, and it looked like a bullet hole to me. I showed it to Chopko.

"I'll be damned," he said. He looked at me curiously.

"Let's go down in the basement."

The steps to the basement led from the kitchen, which also supported my theory. We went down, and over to the laundry chute near the gas furnace.

It was a straight chute, directly below the lavatory. I said, "Ed Burrows stood here, and fired directly up the chute, into that plywood top."

"And then ate the gun?"

My eyes were on the concrete floor, on the perforated grill to the drain there. Ed would pass right over it, on his way up the stairs.

Chopko saw the direction of my gaze. "Those things are cemented in, aren't they?"

"Not usually." I bent, got one finger nail under the edge of the light stamping that served as a grill, and flipped it clear of the opening.

It wasn't much of a drop to the bottom, but it was too dark to make out clearly whether or not there was anything there. I flicked my lighter.

By its flickering light I was sure I could

see something solid protruding from the surface of the water in there. It looked like the barrel of a revolver to me.

I stifled my imagination, and put my hand down into the opening as far as it would go. I just made it with my finger tips. I pulled it out, and showed it to Chopko.

It was a revolver, all right.

Chopko looked at it for some seconds, before saying, "Only thing wrong with that, it's a .38. And she was killed with a .32."

"This wasn't the murder gun," I said. "This was the sound effects." I laid it carefully on the floor. I'd touched nothing but the barrel, so far, and didn't want any possibility of prints eliminated. "Whitnall killed his ex-wife with a silenced gun. He gave that to Dartanian or Gillespie when they left. They got rid of it, one way or another. Burrows goes down into the basement, here, after Whitnall is planted right in front of me, the perfect disinterested witness. Burrows shoots off this .38, making one hell of a racket, ditches it, and runs up to the kitchen in time to come rushing out of there with Babe and lipstick all over his collar. They're all covered, and the gun is gone, and what kind of a case can the D.A. make out of that?"

"None," Chopko said. "Not even now, he can't make a case out of it." He looked at me with something like good humor on his broad face. "You're all right, Jones. You'll forget an old man's peeve?"

I grinned at him. "I was a cop once myself. You said you'd like to work those two young punks over, Sergeant. Maybe that would be the weakest link, huh?"

He smiled. "Maybe. The smoke, here, would drift up through that chute into the bathroom, wouldn't it?"

"Right. There was already some smoke in there, from Sam's gun, so—"

I never finished the sentence. There was the sound of a door being opened, upstairs. It sounded like the front door to me.

I looked at Chopko. He shrugged.

"You hide," I said. "There, in the fruit cellar. They might think I'm here alone."

Chopko went into the boarded fruit cellar, as I went back to the foot of the basement steps.

I heard the steps going through the tiled hall, now, and then into the kitchen. I heard Ed Burrow's voice. "Hey, Sam, this back door's open."

A silence that seemed to stretch into minutes.

I made a lot of intentional noise walking over to the laundry chute again.

From the top of the steps, Sam called, "That you down there, Jones?"

"Right," I said. "I just wanted to check this laundry chute. I found the gun."

Another silence, and then two pairs of feet were coming down the steps. Sam was first, Burrows right behind him.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Sam asked. "You got too much guts for one man, Jones."

"That's what I've been told," I agreed. "Stay out at the opium den last night, Sam?" I had my head in the laundry chute, and I was looking up the passage as I said this.

No answer from them. I pulled my head out and turned to face them. "That must be some business you've got out there. Good enough to protect with Myrtle's death. Did she want in, Sam, or did she just want a lump sum?"

Sam was staring at me. Ed said, "Why don't we work him over right? What are we waiting for?"

"Sam hasn't got his gun," I said, "nor you yours, Ed. But I have mine."

They stood there at the bottom of the steps, neither one moving. Sam said, "I told you he was a bright boy. You've figured it all out, haven't you, Jonesy? What do you think it will get you?"

(Continued on page 130)

ANSWERS TO THE THIRD DEGREE

(Questions on page 53)

1. Madjoon is hashish intended for chewing.

2. False. The "hyoscine cure" is a type of cure sometimes given drug addicts. Here, addicts are taken off their drugs and kept under the influence of hyoscine for a period of time.

3. False. Hashish users have been known to commit fiendish murders.

4. A "bindle stiff" is a morphine user.

5. True. "Bird's eye" is crook slang for a package of adulterated morphine.

6. Quite often the person known as a "wire" is popular with convicts, although this is not always true. In convict slang, a "wire" is a guard who does favors for the prison inmates.

7. If a convict friend told you you were "woody," you should be angry. "Woody" means crazy.

8. In the slanguage of the crook, "velvet" means the tongue.

9. True. The underworld slang term, "weeping and waiting," is used in reference to an individual in prison who constantly hopes to be released.

10. If your crook friend told you he had been "skinned," you should know that for some reason or other he had just had his head shaved.

11. True. In the slanguage of the underworld, a "slap man" is a plain clothes detective.

12. Depending on the stand he takes, a "rapper" can be either helpful or harmful to a person on trial. A "rapper" is a witness. (Probably most frequently the term "rapper" is used for witnesses against the accused.)

13. If your underworld acquaintance told you he was going to "a rest house," you should know he was being sent to prison.

14. False. A "patterer" is a person who is very glib of tongue and persuasive.

15. According to the crook's way of thinking, the initials "P.A." stand for Prosecuting Attorney.

16. If you heard a gang of crooks discussing the fact that they had "lost their lighthouse," you should know they were talking about losing their lookout man.

17. True. In crook slang, the term "law" is sometimes used in reference to prison guards.

18. False. A "hemper widow" is a woman whose husband has been executed by hanging.

19. True. "Hook" is a term sometimes used in reference to razor.

20. If a man is said to be "hinkty," he is suspicious of something.

Dim as death, tortured as a madman's mind, was the path that led to their final rendezvous—the man who believed in nothing and the girl who believed everything under a—

MURDER

CHAPTER ONE

The Frightened Fiancée

HIS fiancée's letter emitted no ticking sounds, yet Larry Paul's instinct was to plunge it unopened into a pail of water. Judith almost never wrote, having the prodigal telephone habit of the incurably rich. That she had put pen to paper was ominous.

He took it out on his tiny balcony for its formal opening. Through the filigree railing the roofs of Paris leveled away to the Seine. From the hazy city ascended the quiet symphony of people going home in the evening.

The smooth paper spoke through his fingertips of the texture of another world, another life. A reminiscent hunger awoke in him.

> Darling, tie on your hat. Another nice man has asked me to wed him. This one has money enough to silence any suspicion about his motive. I am thinking seriously of accepting him.

"He doesn't need no doctor. This guy is dead!"

MOON

By
C. P. Donnel, Jr.

Larry went indoors, returned with some brandy.

You worry about my money, I don't doubt your sincerity. But could you also be dramatizing yourself in a noble pose, my lad—rationalizing a fear of settling down?

Oh, I love you, shamelessly. I will laugh at your stories, be mother, wife, and Cleopatra to you. In time of trouble I will cut my way through a wall of living flesh to your side. You may have all my money; or, if you prefer, I shall refuse to let you touch a cent of it.

There is just one thing I *won't* do for you. And that is just what I have been doing: sitting nibbling my nails, while you tinker with the ethics of a poor-type man marrying a rich-type girl.

I'm increasingly nervous, insecure emotionally. I've seen Uncle George several times—as a neurologist and brain surgeon he is also a psychiatrist. Uncle George says—but no, I won't bore you. But I am about to do something desperate, like marrying somebody else. Yes, this is a threat. But not an empty one.

One more thing: I accept the fact that trouble has a weird affinity for you. You attract it the way I attract smooth men with gilt-edged schemes for doubling my fortune. I believe your explanations—which I didn't ask for—about your latest jams. I write it off as mere coincidence that a woman was involved both times.

I really believe—fool that I am—that when Detreville and his lackeys threw you out of his palace and onto the front pages, they were throwing out not a boudoir snake, but a journalist trying to get a hot yarn from the Russian-born Madame D. I believe the same of the Czech attaché's widow and the fracas on the Calais train. Well and good. But don't overstrain my credulity.

My plea is, come home, darling, and lead mamma to the altar before something happens that even mamma can't swallow. If marriage is death to you, take time to wind up your affairs—business of course.

Next Friday is Anniversary Number One of our meeting. It was at 11:10 p.m., outside Madison Square Garden, after the Kid Loo-Arty Dunkel fight that Don Dunn introduced us—in case you've forgotten.

Well, next week, on the appointed night, I shall be on that spot.

If you show up—wonderful!

If you don't—

Oh, Larry, please be there! I love you!

Larry put the brandy aside. It lacked an ingredient he had assumed all brandy possesses. Dutch courage. Nowhere in that bottle was the dram which would embolden him to tell Judith that he was not one to be hurried. Instead, he was alarmed. It came to him, with a trapped sensation like claustrophobia, that his happiness was in her hands. And that there was no way of repossessing himself of it save through her.

He reread the letter. Behind her cavalier tone, Judith, too, was frightened. It had taken all her courage to declare herself.

He meditated cabling—then, out of confusion as to what tone to adopt, hit on the one sensible course. No write, no cable, no telephone. Just be there, on time, with posies in his hand. The hackles of his pride subsided at the prospect of Judith's eyes when she saw him, of the feel of her in his arms.

He hurried indoors. After the usual protracted struggle with the Paris telephone system, he virtuously informed one Moby Dick Jenkins that tonight's party was o-double-eff, off. He would have stayed home and worked on his book—the Italian elections had called for an additional chapter—but for the certainty that Moby Dick would barge in later. Accordingly, he invited Professor Gysicky to dinner to discuss Balkan affairs. Gysicky was heavy, sad, slow of speech, eminently respectable and safe. And always hungry. Larry named Maxim's for their meeting.

TWELVE hours after the incident at Maxim's, Larry betook his contused face and battered body aboard the Queen Mary at Cherbourg. Behind him the radical press of Paris capered and hooted. He crawled into bed and shooed out a solicitous steward.

This flight, however repugnant, was mandatory. No less a personage than the ambassador himself, in bathrobe and slippers, had made that quite clear. The am-

bassador had said, "Well, what did you expect?"

"But my book won't be out until next month," Larry protested.

"I read it last night in proof," said the ambassador. "The State Department sent them over. Some of your documentary stuff makes that book an international incident."

Larry swelled. "That's flattering."

The ambassador was grim. "What disturbs me is that the other side is learning finesse. A year ago they'd have ganged up on you in an alley and crippled you for life."

A shudder stole across Larry's shoulder blades. "I see."

"Tonight's incident was staged to point up your pugnacity, your inability to hold your liquor, your—forgive me—instability."

"I was with Gysicky. I was stark, staring sober. You know, I almost wish they'd made a martyr out of me."

"Exactly. Now, this woman in question—"

"She came over uninvited," said Larry between his teeth, "and plunked herself in my lap. I asked her politely to—"

"You struck the first blow. A man smaller than you—"

"And twenty pounds heavier. I begged him to get his intoxicated lady off my neck. I said I didn't feel like fighting. I brushed him aside—"

"Whereupon he thrashed you, rather severely." The ambassador's eyes had a sardonic glint. "You are now that stock despicable figure, the amorous bully whipped by a chivalrous escort."

Larry was sick. Deep in his mind, Judith murmured—"don't overstrain my credulity."

"Therefore, I request you to leave town. If you stay, there'll be more of the same. By the time your book comes out, its effect will be negligible. You will be depicted as lying viciously out of spite and for revenge. More of this could get you fired by your press association."

"What do I do?" Outside of a blind impulse to search out his late conquerors and try again, Larry seemed to have no coherent thoughts.

The ambassador said briskly, "The *Queen Mary* sails at noon. I've engaged a cabin for you"—Larry gaped—"under the name of John A. Bronson, of Milwaukee. Go home. Lie doggo. Let this thing die." The ambassador's earnestness had been impressive. "If you must make news, make respectable news—die of heart failure, win a Pulitzer Prize, get married. But watch out. They may follow up Again, they may figure tonight's farce is sufficient in your case. Good-bye."

"I'll be careful." His crushed ego was reviving. He turned to practical considerations. "Will you talk to my Paris boss?"

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"I already have."

"Thank you, sir." Life brightened. In one light, this thing was a veritable bonus. The *Queen* would reach New York thirty-odd hours before his date with Judith. A rest on board, plus the services of the ship's physician. . . . On the rebound, he was close to jubilant. "Don't worry about me—ah—pulling anything in New York, sir."

The ambassador had said wearily that he would cross his fingers.

Now, with the salt air cooling his hot face, Larry gave himself to heady plans. His book might conceivably make him some real money—enough to finance a honeymoon. Once he had demonstrated his ability to pay the checks for two, they could wind up at Judith's Arizona ranch.

The *Queen* began to pitch majestically. Let it blow. The whole way home, if it chose. He was seasoned. . . . New York. . . . Lovely, desirable Judith. . . . Judith, soft-eyed and eager, under the marquee at the Garden. He'd go early, for the luxury of watching her arrive. He visualized the ineffable grace of her body and head as she turned her head this way and that, looking for him. Judith—Mrs. Laurence Newell Paul, Jr. The diamond-bright days of Arizona. . . . The star-spangled nights!

THE storm-ridden *Queen*, a day behind schedule, was making fast to her pier when Larry stepped into the shower. He lingered under the hot water. His decision to be among the last ashore gave him the illusion of proceeding warily, and he was sure the ambassador would approve.

The bustle of debarkation died as he toweled himself. His watch on the dresser told him that in exactly six hours these hands now wielding the towel would be holding the hands of Miss Judith Foss Laing.

The urge to rush ashore and telephone Judith attacked. He conquered it, as a child, waking before dawn, heroically resists exploring his Christmas stocking until the appointed hour. His cue was to keep busy. Maybe he could catch the big chief in his office and put him straight on the fiasco at Maxim's. Or show his publisher the new chapters—he was rather proud of them.

Brisk now with purpose, he was climbing into his trousers when the knock came. He called, "Come in, steward."

A little gasp turned him round. The girl in the doorway was wide-eyed. As he leapt for the bathroom he bellowed, "Wrong cabin!"

"Aren't you Laurence Paul?" She sounded amused.

The invasion of his alias was bad, worse was the instantaneous conviction that they were after him again. He yanked up the trousers, emerged menacingly. "I'll give you three seconds to get out. One, two—"

"Mr. Margetson sent me," she said composedly. "He want you to give me any additional work you've done on the book. I'm on his staff."

"Margetson didn't know I was coming." The cool way she expected him to fork over material he had bought with his blood! He seized her arm. "Only the International Press office knew I was coming under the name of Bronson. You must have got your dope from Paris. Give!"

"If you must know, I'm engaged to Luke Dorgan in your home office. He knows you're doing a book for Margetson. He tipped me off. Margetson is anxious—"

If anything, it was too pat. He tried an old trick. "If you're engaged to Luke, what year did he play end for Pennsylvania?"

"Mr. Dorgan played tackle for Dartmouth," she recited promptly. "At least, so he has informed me some thousand times. He had the pleasure of breaking your collarbone in the Dartmouth-Yale

game in nineteen hundred thirty-nine to be exact."

"Oh." Larry, reddening, loosed her. "Look, if you'd like to go over the new stuff, how about waiting at the I. P. office while I make my peace with the big boss, and then we— What's the matter?" She was shaking her head. She was pretty.

"That's another reason I'm here. Luke says, and I quote, 'Tell Playboy Paul to lie low awhile and let the Man with the Fuzzy Ears cool down.' It seems your boss is about to unemploy you. By the way, for what it's worth, my name is Elsa Tirrell."

"How do you do?" The cabin door transmitted a discreet knock. Out of his daze, Larry called, "Come in."

The steward entered, looked from Larry to Miss Tirrell.

"My wife," said Larry feebly. "I'll be packed in a minute, dear."

Four floors below, across the street, the big man set off suddenly for the tavern at the corner—his third visit in an hour. From his living room window, Larry, watching, hoped he would stay gone this time. He was not really alarmed. That crowd would hardly employ an agent as inept as this loiterer.

The gilt clock on the mantel chimed ten times. Under the lamp, the manuscript crackled as Elsa Tirrell worked on it.

Larry twitched back the curtain. The big man was striding back from the tavern, his indecision no longer noticeable. He wheeled, marched across the street. Larry murmured, "We're going to have company."

His tone brought Elsa's head up. "How do you know?"

He did not care to confess to the cold core of apprehension in his stomach. "I'm psychic. Look, Elsa, if anything starts to happen, please beat it and forget you've ever been here. Better get your things ready."

Elsa was understandably puzzled. "I'm not the nervous type," she said. But she got up. "If you say so."

"Messy situations seem to follow me around," he said, as she started for the bedroom. He decided that digging up his old .22 target pistol would be absurdly melodramatic. He went into the hall, stood by the door. Already the stairs were telling of a heavy tread.

The footfalls stopped outside his door. Abruptly, with some idea of taking the initiative, Larry stepped out. Startled, the visitor gave ground.

"Well?" Larry made it crisp, forbidding.

"Is your name Paul?" The big man was disarmingly mild. He was youngish. His not unhealthy whiteness, the hang of his powerful arms, suggested a masseur. His face was broad, his mouth disproportionately small. When Larry nodded, he said, "Can we talk. Not here, inside."

Larry heard Elsa in the living room. "Here." He closed the door.

Displeasure made the big man aware of his bulk and strength. "I got to have some dough." The pursy mouth tightened. "I don't say I like to do it this way. But I'm gonna."

Larry said, with strained politeness, "Please get to the point."

"I tried to see her uncle upstate, but they said he was outa town for a couple days. So it looks like you, Mr. Paul."

"Whose uncle?"

"Miss Laing's uncle—Foss. Don't kid me, Mr. Paul, I seen it in the papers last year about you and her getting engaged. I got a wonderful memory. So when they said Doc Foss was away, I come down here and looked you up in the phone book and here I am." His pale blue eyes narrowed suddenly as they watched Larry's face. "Relax, friend, I've handled disturbed guys bigger than you. By myself."

"Disturbed—" So this man was an asylum or sanatorium attendant. An unexplained fear constricted Larry's throat.

"Her uncle?" he repeated. He was numb, confused.

"Dr. George Foss." The man had a slight lisp. "The big brain surgeon with the clinic up at Coffee Corners. The one that does pre-frontal lobotomies—stuff like that." He leaned closer.

"You wanted money from Foss?" The big man affected him like the sight of fat white maggots at work. "Why?"

The big man sniffed. "Let's quit playing, Mr. Paul. Her uncle knows. I know. You know. But the newspapers don't know. Figure it this way: The tabloids'll go for it big—a girl rich as Laing is. But suppose she gets well some day—it ain't likely, but suppose. Then people'll remember what they read. Only, you slip me a thousands bucks and they won't read nothing."

"Know what?" The words twanged in a silence like a vacuum.

All right, said the pale blue eyes, *you asked for it.* The small mouth pursed itself. "That she's 'No Glass on Tray.' " He saw that Larry did not understand. "That means, she don't get anything on her food tray she might kill herself with." Larry's expression seemed to exasperate him. "She's gone nuts. Violent. Homicidal. They've had to put her away." He grimaced, almost apologetically. "I know it ain't pretty to say. But there it is."

To his amazement, Larry found himself quite calm. Coolly, his mind examined and rejected these monstrous statements. "You're a lousy, stinking liar," he said, without heat. "Miss Laing's in New York. I'm meeting her tonight." His watch told him it was now 10:25.

"You think so?" The attendant shook his head. "Hell, Mr. Paul, they've even took her teeth all out. They got to, in some cases like hers."

Had the man said it cruelly, or with vindictive satisfaction, Larry might have killed him—with his own teeth, if necessary. But the faint note of commiseration stayed him. The man went on, "I thought you must ha' known. I was working at—at the place she is now, when they brought her there last Tuesday. As for it being her, why, she come in the Foss Clinic ambulance."

Larry said skeptically, "If it's Judith, why didn't Foss keep her at his clinic? Mind you, I know it's not Judith, but—"

"He ain't got room. He just keeps a P.O. or two."

"P.O.?"

"Post-operatives. People he's worked on. Sometimes they need more cutting—besides the clinic he's got his own addition over at the Kaskcopac Hospital, where he operates. But he ain't got facilities for real disturbed ones like this niece. We had a job gettin' her to bed, Mr. Paul, her sedative had worn off—"

"No!" Larry's heart was racing dangerously. "You can't sell me. Even if it is Judith—which I don't believe—it must be a mistake. "What kind of place is it? And who are you, to be peddling a blackmail yarn like this? By God, if I had time, I'd—"

"Don't beat your brains out trying to see her, Mr. Paul. You wouldn't like it. About me—" he colored—"I got fired. Day before yesterday. For being drunk. I got to have money. I got a wife. I owe people. Now, why don't you just slip me the dough? I won't come back for no more."

"I'm meeting Miss Laing tonight." He looked into the big man's eyes. Suddenly his subconscious mind spoke. "What's the name of this place?" Judith's serio-comic promise about cutting her way through a wall of living flesh flashed in his mind. Suppose Judith really was in some sort of a jam. One chance in a thousand. "Where is this girl?" Larry repeated, in a new, hard voice.

The ex-attendant said, "I'll throw that in for your grand."

"I haven't got a grand." Larry's anger,

reinforced by fear, mounted until he felt bigger than the big man. "And you're going to tell me."

"And let you and Foss switch her to some other joint tonight, under another name. And tell me to go blow up a chimney for my dough— Hey, watch it, Mac —why, damn your soul, I'll—"

Larry found his hands full of the thick, soft throat. He banged the big head against cracking plaster. "Where is it?" he grated.

CHAPTER TWO

Manhunt

"MR. PAUL!" The voice was sharp, shocked. It was the small, erect, bird-like widow who had the apartment opposite his. "Stop that this instant! The idea, turning this place into a prize-ring!" At Larry's expression she scampered past him and down the stairs.

It came to Larry that his victim was now unable, rather than unwilling, to speak. He relaxed his grip a little. The big man coughed from his stomach. He spoke. Larry let him go. He sagged against the wall.

"Pine Hill?" Larry said.

The big man nodded, swallowing air. Then his long arms took Larry off guard.

Larry punched despairingly at the barrel belly. The big man waded through the blows as through shallow water. His hands found Larry's throat. Larry found himself, all at once, being manipulated violently, as a marionette.

The motion ceased as suddenly as it had begun. Walls and ceiling, hitherto blurred, slipped into focus. Larry heard Elsa Tirrell's voice. But his eyes were on the big man. The big man's face was mushroom-colored, as though some fatal corruption within him were forcing its way to the surface. "Heart," he said laboriously. "Kep' me out—army—doc said —watch drink—" The pale eyes passed beyond fear. "Ah," said the big man faintly, and fell.

Elsa's voice, in Larry's ear, was drowned out by a new voice, male, demanding, "What's all this?" It was a uniformed policeman, hounded up the stairs by the widow.

"They were fighting," chirped the widow. "Over that girl, probably."

The policeman knelt briefly by the big man. As he rose, he glanced mechanically at his watch. Larry said vaguely to the officer, "He was choking me. His heart quit on him. I'll call a doctor, and—"

"He don't need no doctor." The officer's face darkened. "Don't you move." To the widow: "Madam, will you phone for a squad car?"

Larry said, with the calm of desperation, "I've got to go somewhere. You can come along if you're afraid I'll—"

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"The hell you say! You're for headquarters, guy." The policeman's eyes fixed on Elsa. "You too, lady." His left hand closed on Larry's arm, his right went to his hips for handcuffs.

Madness descended upon Larry. He said loudly to Elsa, "Look, Annabelle—" the officer checked his motion to listen— "run for it! Understand? Run for it."

Elsa, pale, nodded, stepped down.

"Oh, no, you don't," said the policeman. Larry shouldered between them. The policeman swore, snatched at her over Larry's shoulder. The move suspended his chin over Larry's right hand.

With the sensation of profaning an altar, Larry hit him. The policeman went to his knees, dazed. Larry hesitated, unable to bring himself to strike again. He yanked the official gun from its holster, held it before the clouded eyes. "Look," he said, and flung it down the hall. Then he ran downstairs.

The remarkable Miss Tirrell had a cab waiting, its door open. As Larry jumped in, she said loudly, for the driver's benefit, "Oh, darling, what kept you?"

"Forgot my wallet." He caught his breath. "Madison Square Garden," he said, "and step on it, pal." He looked affectionately at Elsa. "If Luke ever jilts you, you be sure and see me before you do anything."

"I might, at that. I'll get off in a moment. Good luck, Lochinvar."

There was nothing on at the Garden this night. It had the lifelessness of a summer resort in January. Walking the darker shadows of the entrance, Larry felt chilled and ill. The initial surge of elation at being on time had ebbed with unnerving swiftness. It was 11:38 now. His legs tightened as he walked. Three or four times, police cars had gone by, their sirens twisting needles in his heart. The big man's voice yammered in his mind: " *'No Glass on Tray.' That means, she is nuts —violent—homicidal—"*

Larry stopped, stood stock still, peering at the town car which had just pulled up at the curb. He felt his mouth go slack in an idiotic grin. It was like Judith to pull the town car on him for a gag.

And that man opening the door was Peebles! Larry set himself to stroll forward. Then something gave way, and he was running, a great sob straining his throat. Ten feet from the car he stopped dead. Peebles recognized him, gravely touched his cap. A woman got out. Larry saw no more than that it was not Judith. His anguished glance flew past her to the tonneau. The tonneau was empty.

The woman was Miss Maltby. Like Peebles, she was a legacy from Judith's parents. Her mouth opened to ask a question, closed as she saw the answer in Larry's eyes. Finally and faintly she said, "I'd hoped—" Silence. "Of course," she said, "nothing has really happened—"

"She meant to come here, then?" Larry's lips were dry, stiff.

"Oh, *yes!*" Miss Maltby paused, wagged her head slowly. "Her car must have broken down. Of course she meant to be here. She kept talking about you. Why, the day she left town—"

"When did she go? And where?" Larry controlled his voice. He wanted a cigarette, but did not wish to emphasize the shaking of his hands.

Miss Maltby thought. "Let's see—this is Friday. It must have been Monday—wasn't it, Peebles?" The old man nodded. "She said she just couldn't sit around and wait. Said she'd probably wind up in Canada for some golf. I was a little teeny bit worried about her."

"Worried?"

"Oh, nothing serious. Just excited. Nervous. She promised she'd stop by Coffee Corners and get her Uncle George to look her over before she went anywhere. So I felt better. But now—" Miss Maltby's mask of determined optimism slipped. "She meant to meet you! She'd

told me all about—" she flushed—"love—*you* know—"

Half a block behind the limousine a sedan had stopped. Something smoothly professional about the way it was being maneuvered into a parking space roused Larry's suspicion. Three men in plain clothes got out, followed by a man in a taxi driver's cap and a policeman in uniform who nursed his chin as they conferred on the sidewalk.

Gently but firmly Larry took Miss Maltby's arm and inserted her into the limousine. He said to Peebles, "Please get us away from here as soon as possible."

Peebles rose to the occasion. They had traveled two blocks before he asked quietly where Larry wanted to go. Miss Maltby cut in quickly, "Won't you come to the apartment? She may be there now. . . ."

"Peebles, drive to Grand Central, please. Miss Maltby you go straight home. I'll phone from the station. If she's come home, of course I'll come right over."

"Suppose she comes home after you leave town, Mr. Paul?"

"Don't let her out of your sight until I get back." At the station he tried to walk to the Information Desk—the less conspicuous he made himself, the better. But he kept breaking into a trot.

THE owner of the Coffee Corners Inn led Larry's eye to a clock. "Think you're gonna raise Doc Foss at three in the morning, friend?"

"I'm gonna try, friend." Larry was drugged with fatigue. A reaction had blackjacked him on the train and he had nearly slept past Beddleton, the station for Coffee Corners. The lone Beddleton taxi had been out, taking a sick woman over to Kaskcopac Hospital. Larry had had to walk to a cross-roads garage, knock endlessly, wrangle for a car.

The innkeeper pushed a phone at him, and disappeared.

The Foss Clinic, through a cultured feminine voice, informed Larry that Dr. Foss was at his home. Dr. Foss's home, through a hard-to-waken, irritable housekeeper, said the doctor was at the clinic. The voice at the clinic hung up on Larry's attempt to quote the housekeeper. Larry went into the dark bar, caught the innkeeper sneaking a drink.

"Can't sell liquor at this hour," said the man hastily and virtuously, starting to put the bottle away.

Larry possessed himself gently of the bottle and drank. He laid five dollars on the counter. The innkeeper ignored the money, but he turned friendly. "Couldn't raise George, eh?"

"Where does he sleep, under a tree?"

The innkeeper drank again. "Just between us—and I'll swear I never told you—George is probably over treating Mrs. Dane. Widow. Youngish." His eyes and eyebrows conveyed additional information.

Larry had never met Foss. His picture of a white-haired specialist with an episcopal manner faded. "What's he treating her for, at this hour?"

"For what ails her, I guess." Once more the innkeeper tipped the bottle. He blinked. "Still," he said vaguely, "I guess George can afford her. Even if that Foss Addition at Kaskcopac Hospital cost him plenty. Guess he makes plenty. Still, he does a lot of work free. Dreamer type." Larry concentrated hard on the tenuous thread of this. "Don't know money from soap, George don't. Still, that rich niece of his—"

"Niece!"

"Yeah. Lousy rich. She makes up losses at the Foss Clinic. Woman who used to keep the books there told me. Said George and the niece used to argue."

A different picture of Uncle George took sinister shape in Larry's mind. "They argue, eh?"

"Yeah, the niece has to argue him into taking the money."

"Oh." His new conception of Uncle George winked out like a candle flame.

"Yeah. George always says he don't need it. Then the niece laughs and goes over the books and makes out a check for the slack. She tells George if he's got any poor cases that interest him, just go ahead and give 'em the best. Like this Forman guy upstairs.

"Forman's a little grey guy. Got a daughter that's a patient at the Foss Clinic. My guess is, George—or the niece—is stumping up for Forman's bill here. The daughter's been in and out of asylums two-three times. No hope, they told Forman. Then George got interested in her and thinks he may be able to operate. Forman thinks George is God. But he's scared, of course. Even an operation don't always help."

Larry let his yawn show. Ten minutes later he was in bed.

A JAYBIRD woke Larry to a world full of sunshine. As he dressed, the beauty of the day planted a seed of optimism, which germinated as he went downstairs and telephoned Judith's apartment in New York.

Maltby answered. No. Had he heard anything? Anything? Larry went to hunt up the innkeeper.

"Cab?" The innkeeper chuckled. "Hell, the clinic's just over the rise there, the way Forman's going." He pointed out a small, dejected figure trudging up the road. He looked at Larry's grey face. "Bar won't open till nine, but if you won't take any breakfast—"

The liquor assisted him up the rise. At the top, the view of the Foss Clinic smote him. It was a gigantic old farmhouse, restored to picture-postcard perfection.

Larry turned in under a rustic sign that read, with arrogant simplicity: G. FOSS, M. D. In the "barnyard" a man in overalls polished a sleek station wagon.

The blossom-canopied lane now seemed to harden and strike back at his feet. Larry's nervousness heightened with each step; he was barely aware of the maid who let him in, of the regal nurse-receptionist in the elaborately casual living room that served as a waiting room.

If she recognized his name, she gave no sign. She went out. When she returned to say that Dr. Foss would see him shortly, Larry listened more to her inflections than her words. A note of professional sympathy left him dry-mouthed with freshly renewed fear.

The interview with Foss came so quickly that he had not time to get a real grip on himself. First Forman appeared, his face a curious mask of misery and half-dead hope. Forman shuffled out like a sleepwalker. Larry fell in behind the nurse. In a pine-panelled hall she opened a door, said, "Mr. Paul, Doctor," and was gone.

Dr. Foss, straight-backed at a maple desk, looked up from a newspaper. He neither stood nor invited Larry to sit. "I take it you're the Laurence Paul who's engaged to my niece. What do you want here?"

Once more, Larry revised his notion of George Foss. The innkeeper's babble had conjured up a mellow, absent-minded scientist. A dodderer.

No latent softness here. Angular, broad of shoulder, Foss had the lean, leathery handsomeness of a brusque country squire. His vitality, his strong, youthful hands belied the short hair salted with white. The resemblance to Judith was plain in the large, direct eyes and finely modeled nose, and suggested in the mouth.

Larry said, "I'm—I was trying to find Judith." He was as awkward as a schoolboy stammering before his principal. Dr. Foss made no comment. "She was supposed to meet me in New York last night," said Larry. "She didn't show up," he added lamely, redundantly.

Dr. Foss, thin-lipped, said, "Perhaps

she saw this." He tapped the newspaper.

It was several seconds before Larry's muddled mind recognized the vaguely familiar face on the front page as his own.

LAURENCE PAUL AND 'WIFE' SOUGHT AFTER FATAL BRAWL
Writer, Fiancée of Heiress, Slugs Policeman, Runs off with Woman.
Laurence N. Paul, Jr., foreign correspondent and author, was sought by police last night after a brawl at his apartment on E. 64th St. in which an unidentified man met death. A witness told police the fight was over a woman. . . .

Larry looked at Dr. Foss with the eyes of a whipped dog. "She couldn't have seen this," he argued. "She—it only happened a few minutes before she was to have met me. She—"

"There were other incidents," Dr. Foss reminded him frigidly. Dismissal was in his face.

Larry said desperately, "But the man was a blackmailer. He'd been fired from a place called Pine Hill. He said Judith was there."

"She is," said Dr. Foss very quietly. "We have you to thank for that—in part." He nodded toward the door.

Larry could hear, quite plainly, the ticking of his watch; then his voice, broken, unconvincing: "But the man said she's strapped down—that they've taken out her teeth. That she—"

"The man," said Dr. Foss, "was lying. Even you, Paul, should know a fairy tale when you hear one. Judith is in a highly emotional state. She came to visit me Monday. She had you very much on her mind. The Paris incident, I take it, provided the last straw. During the night she became temporarily irrational. In view of her condition during the last six months—"

Larry made a wordless sound of surprise and interrogation.

"She hasn't told you she's been to me several times for treatment in the last few months?" Larry shook his head. Dr. Foss's eyes were agate. "Perhaps she didn't want to worry you." The contempt in Foss's voice was withering. "Let me finish. You should learn what you have accomplished by your behavior towards Judith. Her state on Monday night was what is loosely known as a nervous breakdown. Tuesday she was rational. I had no need to advise formal treatment. She was quite aware that she could no longer deal with her emotional problems. Now she is at Pine Hill." The doctor's glance went to the newspaper; his self-control was weakening. "You seem to have done all the damage one person is capable of. I suggest you return to New York."

"But you're off base, Doctor! That business in Paris was a—a plot—"

The doctor's lip curled at the word. The utter, ludicrous futility of explanations gagged Larry momentarily. He could only mumble sullenly, stubbornly, after a mo-

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946, of New Detective Magazine, published bi-monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1948. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Publisher of New Detective Magazine, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Managing Editor, none; Business Manager, none. 2. That the owner is: Fictioneers, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Publisher. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 15th day of October, 1948. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 116. Register's No. 363-W-0. (My commission expires March 30, 1950.) [Seal]—Form 3526—Rev. 7-46.

ment, "I've still got to see her myself."

"I should have expected something like that of you," said Dr. Foss, as though in quiet amazement at his own stupidity. "See her! Of all people, you! Try to grasp this—even *I* shall not see Judith for some time." His eyes, fixed on Larry's, narrowed at what they saw there. "Dr. August, at Pine Hill, will not let you see her. If you make trouble, he will call the State Police." Foss stood up. His eyes froze Larry out of the room.

On a rock beside the road, Forman roosted like a sick sparrow. Larry stopped. He said, as though they had known each other for a long time, "Better come along and have a drink." Forman climbed down obediently and plodded along at Larry's side.

CHAPTER THREE

Shake Hands With the Corpse

THE third drink did for Forman. He said, "My daughter—" Then, as quickly as it had come, the urge to talk passed. His face went blank. Tears ran down his creased cheeks. The innkeeper was evidently accustomed to this stage. He said, "It's okay, Mr. Paul. It's not your fault," and led Forman away.

Larry faced his reflection in the mirror. It was time to put his house in order. Or what remained of his house. He started by salvaging two bright objects.

The first was Judith. Judith was all right. Dr. Foss was correct about the ex-attendant. He had pitched his story high for psychological effect. A plain, ordinary breakdown was no lever for prying blackmail money out of people. Judith was in good hands, her recovery a foregone conclusion.

The lesser consolation was the realization that this current situation, however catastrophic, was strictly home-cooked. His sneaking fear that the forces behind his debacle at Maxim's were still at work had vanished. At least, he had only the domestic forces of law to contend with—painful as that promised to be.

There was always an outside chance that eventually he might see Judith, make her listen, restore their relationship slowly, building firmly as he went.

He called New York, the vast legal factory of Miller, Doone, Wignett and Laidlaw. It crossed his mind, as he waited to get hold of Matt Laidlaw, that at this very moment he should have been lunching with Judith. A wave of self-pity, given impetus by the whiskey, swept over him. When Laidlaw answered it was several seconds before he succeeded in making himself known. Laidlaw said, in his dry way, "I've been reading the most exciting things about you in the papers. I never thought my old roommate would become famous."

"Matt, you've got to come up here."

"Where, why, and anyhow, no. Come back to New York."

"And get picked up before I can get to you, and massaged by fifteen dicks for fifteen hours while you're digging up a habeas corpus. You come up here. Quick."

Laidlaw considered. "How drunk are you?"

"Not as drunk as I'll be if you don't hurry," Larry said crossly. "So step on it." He gave directions.

Laidlaw sighed. "I'll be up this afternoon. Go to bed, bud."

Waiting for Laidlaw, due in from Beddleton around six, the afternoon was endless. Twice Larry tried to nap, but the whiskey sternly refused to affect anything but his legs. Around five, the innkeeper tactfully suggested a walk. Larry refuted this implied slur by going for a walk.

He passed the Foss Clinic with his head high. Foss was a stinker, a jumper-to-conclusions, a stiff-necked so-and-so lacking the decency to listen to a legitimate explanation.

He turned into an unidentified lane, left it to tramp across a plowed field, heeling down ridges, stamping angrily. Foss! Foss, with his down-the-nose, go-to-hell manner. Speaking of noses—

He caught himself up, shocked. Instead of entertaining wild thoughts of punching the aristocratic Foss nose, his cue was to seek out Foss, present himself as he ought to be—as a penitent. Impulse became decision. He certainly felt penitent. And enormously persuasive. Let Foss see how humble and reasonable he was.

Here he discovered that he was adrift without bearings in an apple orchard. He found another lane. After a quarter-mile, it left the orchard, became a driveway curving across a lawn to a white, restored farmhouse, slightly smaller than the Foss Clinic. He was about to back-track when the front door opened. An ample Negro woman, who apparently had spied him from a window, called, "Sir, you all want Miz' Dane?"

"No." But he was tempted to concoct an excuse to see Foss's lady. Only the urge to see Foss at once was dominant. "I'm looking for the Foss Clinic. I guess I got lost. Could you—"

"If it's Dr. Foss you want, he' be back here soon. He and Miz' Dane gone riding, like every afternoon."

With a quick, superstitious feeling that his luck had turned at last, Larry said he would like very much to see Dr. Foss. "You all know Dr. Foss?" she inquired in a friendly manner.

"Oh, yes." She let him in, led him through a spacious living room to a sunporch overlooking an old-fashioned garden in the rear. "They usually come in this-away from riding, and I got lots of stuff to do, so I guess you won't need no announcer." She gestured toward a cabinet. "Do you want a highball, sir? Everything's there." She left him.

Larry made for the cabinet. With Foss imminent, his wrists and knees recalled the last minutes before his Class Day speech in high school. He had a small drink. Beside the cabinet was a door. He investigated, found a small telephone room. He glanced at his watch, discovered to his surprise that it was nearly six. He mixed a highball and retired to the telephone room to inform the inn that he would be a little late. The chair was treacherously comfortable. He stared hard at the phone book, his eyes glazing. He yawned cavernously.

THE clink of glass which roused him seemed almost at his elbow. Through the dizzy moment of orienting himself stole the smell of gin. Dr. Foss was talking, just outside the cracked-open door. Larry, squirming at the thought of being an eaves-dropper, was at a loss.

The doctor's tone was soft, almost yearning. He sounded older.

"Olive or lemon peel, darling?" Mrs. Dane cut in. She had a husky contralto. It was the voice of a young woman at her ease with a man. For some reason, the "darling" held Larry in his chair.

"Peel, I guess." Sounds of a mixer whirling in a Martini pitcher. Foss said hesitantly, "That new mare, Jane, she's a beauty, all right, but don't you think fifteen hundred was a little steep for her?"

"Of course. But that Carlson woman kept bidding, damn her."

Foss said, as one making amends, "Jane, darling, no one can make a Martini like you. Gad, this is good!"

"They come high, though, don't they, George?" From her tone, Larry knew with certainty that she was tall, provocative. Probably the tawny type. "Like me," she added demurely.

"Jane, you know I've never really complained—"

She rattled the pitcher. "Here, come again. Speaking of money, as I so often do, how's your looney niece doing?"

Larry's heart stumbled. "Oh, Judith—"

That was all. Larry would have given an eye to see Foss's face. He was pleased to find himself unexpectedly sober and alert. He abandoned the idea of revealing himself.

"I'll stop being a witch. I'm sorry I said 'looney.' You must be worried about her. Kiss me." The rustle of garments was immediate, the silence long. Then Foss caught his breath hungrily and murmured some pet name. He sounded old, and at once avid and humble.

She said, "Something's worrying you. Is it the operation?"

"Operation?" Foss sounded startled.

"That poor creature—what's her name? Doorman or something—"

"Forman." A silence. "I've seen Lernelle from Danbury," Foss said vaguely. "He advises operating. Still, you always hate to. It'll be pretty drastic, you know."

"What will she be like after it, George?" Mrs. Dane asked.

"Probably a child. Nurses. Learning to eat and walk again. Of course, with milder cases you can often cure. But with her—"

"How fortunate it isn't your niece," Mrs. Dane said brightly.

"Very."

"All that money—" said Mrs. Dane. She changed the subject. "I'm really sorry about that mare. Anyhow, your niece will help out if you're a little short, won't she?"

"I suppose so," Foss said dully.

"Won't you be looking after her affairs while she's at Pine Hill?"

"I suppose so. Look, Jane—"

"Yes."

His mind wandered. "It's a hell of a decision, that Forman—"

Briskly: "You need relaxation. Let's go out to dinner tonight. I'll go up and change. You can pick me up at the usual time."

Five seconds after Foss had gone, Larry was out and across the garden. He had stopped trying to think, even to analyze his present panicky stealth. He wanted no cool reasoning to turn him from his purpose. The interlude between Foss and Mrs. Dane had left his mouth sour, his soul cluttered with shapeless apprehensions.

MATT LAIDLAW snorted. "See Judith! You'll only make trouble."

"To hell with you and trouble too, Matthew."

"But they won't let you. And I know August by reputation. It's a superior type place. Why must you see her?"

"She said she'd come to me. She meant it." Larry remembered now where Judith had picked up "wall of living flesh." It was from an old W. C. Fields picture they had laughted hilariously over. "Now I've got to go to her. I'm going to Pine Hill."

"Probably. Eventually. As an alcoholic."

This was too much. Besides, the bottle was empty. Larry stalked out, went downstairs. At the bar, Forman was the only customer. His face was blank again. He looked at Larry. "Damn everybody in whole world." He overturned his glass with his elbow as he left. The innkeeper mopped up the puddle. "Don't mind him, Mr. Paul. The clinic called him. They want him to sign the papers for the operation."

"Scotch—double. What papers?"

"State law. Got to have the family's permission for those kind of operations. And signatures of a couple of psychiatrists."

"Oh." Larry's urge to see Judith was stronger than ever, but the mechanics of reaching her loomed as horribly complex. He said absently, "Ever hear of a place called Pine Hill?"

"Are you kidding?" The innkeeper treated himself to a short one. "Pine Hill! I was chief steward there twelve years

before I bought the inn. My brother's head gardener there now."

Larry lowered his voice. "Suppose I wanted to see somebody there, a patient. And they wouldn't let me. How would I go about it?"

The innkeeper looked sly. "Miss Judith Laing?" he said softly. When he had milked full satisfaction from Larry's stunned expression, he added, "I hear rumors, you know. I heard George sent her over."

"Then you know who I am. Why haven't you turned me in? You must've seen the papers?"

"Oh, you look harmless enough." The man shrugged. "Besides, you might have noticed I ain't got many paying guests right now."

Larry had a feeling that too much depended on his next move. There was friendliness in the man's eyes, but a wary friendliness. Larry, slowly, pulled out his wallet, put two hundred dollars down.

The innkeeper's eyes counted the money. But he shook his head "If you got any crazy ideas about kidnaping her outa there," he said positively, "there ain't enough money in the world."

"I just want to see her." This was so patently a cry from the heart that the innkeeper softened. "Just to make sure she's okay, that there's no funny business. Just see her for one minute—"

"Doc August don't run that kind of place, Mr. Paul."

"Okay. But suppose—crazy as it sounds—that Foss doped her or something, so that August wouldn't know she was all right."

"Foss! George!" The innkeeper chuckled. His chuckle cracked in the middle. "Wait a minute," he said abruptly, and went out.

Larry poured himself a drink. Raising it, he saw his face in the mirror. He put the drink down untasted.

Ten long minutes dragged by. The innkeeper returned. "I talked to Dave, my brother. She's there, all right. But she's in Rose."

"Rose?"

"Rose Cottage. They got three small cottages on the grounds, just big enough for one patient and a nurse. They're for—well—pretty sick ones—too sick to be around others. But hell, Mr. Paul, with Miss Laing it's probably that she's Foss's niece. She can afford privacy at fifty bucks a day." He frowned as Larry added his last three twenties to the money on the bar. "You'd be taking a big chance, too," he said doubtfully. "There'll be a screen on her window. There's a couple of night watchmen on the grounds. If you got caught you'd go to jail sure."

"I'd rather be in jail than here wondering. You won't have to set foot on the grounds. If anything happens, I won't know you."

The innkeeper's hand went to the money. "It's ninety miles. We'd better start in a few minutes. What about your lawyer friend upstairs?"

"Tell your cook or somebody to go up, after we leave, and tell him I'll be back a little later."

The innkeeper stopped the car beside a low stone wall and switched off his lights. Instantly the moonless night smothered them in darkness.

"That light up there, between the trees—" the innkeeper's voice was jumpy—"that's Rose Cottage. Remember, the light's in the living room. The nurse will have a shakedown there. The room you want is on the left." He thrust something slick and hard into Larry's hand. Larry's sensitive flesh crawled at the mere thought of a weapon and he pushed it away. "Just a screwdriver," said the innkeeper impatiently. "The screen will have an outside bolt. Sometimes they stick." And, as Larry got out: "Remember, if there's a ruckus, don't count on me waiting around."

Larry vaulted the stone wall. Up the slope the rectangle of light was half obliterated by foliage. That he was actually here was more than his mind would accept all at once. It seemed as though he had ceased, these last few hours, to believe in a living Judith. Now, again, she existed in the flesh, the lovely flesh, in that little building.

He moved cautiously up the hill. Through the lighted window the nurse turned out to be a plump woman with greying hair. She filled a chaise longue to overflowing. Her head was back; she was snoring and the motion of her full bosom was encouragingly slow and steady. Across the room was a door, open a scant inch. The oddly designed doorhandle was shiny; a highlight on it held Larry's eyes. Behind that door. . . .

He came out of his brief hypnosis with an ague-like shudder. He worked his way around the back, past a tiny yard with a tall wire fence. As he invaded the shrubbery under the window he sought, each sprung twig seemed to snap directly against his eardrums. His fingers found, followed the ridged lower frame of a strong wire screen. His fumbling hand bumped the bolt and it slid back easily. Even as the tiny click froze him, he told himself it was another good omen.

With the cessation of his own breathing, he became aware that the window inside the screen was open—for he could hear someone breathing in the pitch-black room. It was troubled breathing. He sensed that it came from a bed near the window. He whispered, "Judith!" but could not be sure it carried even to the bed. Until he could shut that door, he was helpless.

The screen opened outward on hinges at the top. Laboriously Larry drew himself over the sill. On his feet, in the room, he thanked his luck for the thick nap of the carpet. In his nostrils was a strange odor, of antiseptics, sedatives, the warmth from the bed, the earthy smell of the night. He skirted the dim outline of the bed and miraculously gained the door without knocking anything over. Closing the door was a major operation that left him badly shaken. When he could make himself retrace his steps, he knelt by the bed, reaching out to measure his nearness. His hand met a hand. Her hand!

She stirred, sighed. He sought her wrist, to waken her gently by pressing her pulse, at the same time whispering, "Darling, don't be afraid. It's me. Larry." She half turned. He felt, faintly, her breath on his cheek. "It's Larry," he breathed. "Don't be afraid." He started to press her wrist, found himself, instead, pressing leather. Leather? And his fingers touched the cool metal of a buckle!

So violent, so overwhelming was his pang of tenderness, of stabbing pity, of blind fury, that he had difficulty, later, in explaining to himself just exactly what happened next. It seemed only a moment before he had freed both her hands. He pulled her up by her shoulders, pressed her head into the hollow of his neck, murmuring warningly as wakefulness stole along her body.

She sighed again, a gusty sigh. Her arms came round his neck and tightened convulsively. He felt the tension spreading from her rigid spine along her arms, into her hands. Her fingers bit into his shoulders. Hard. Harder. Painfully.

Exactly how and when Larry realized that she was—temporarily, at least—quite mad, and that she was trying to kill him, he could never afterwards remember. Revulsion, instinctive as man's fear of a snake, made him fight frantically to free himself. Her slender body was at once a tiger, a burr, a windmill; worse were the soft sounds, almost like the cooing of doves, that she made. Nor was he able, later, to say how he freed himself, or how he had the presence of mind, as he dropped into the bushes, to bolt the screen. His

last memory of that black room of horror was the stout nurse suddenly framed in the inner doorway; of her voice twanging: "Laing! Laing! What are you up to?"

The nurse, he guessed, must have touched off some alarm, for flashlights began bobbing toward the cottage. Larry stumbled, went prone. He shut his eyes tight, for the sickness of that room was in him and he craved unconsciousness. But a second later he was on his feet, running frantically for the wall, hands over his ears for fear he might hear Judith's voice upraised in insane anger.

The car was moving as he tore open the door and tumbled in. Back on the main road, driving perilously without lights, the innkeeper said, "You mighty near missed the boat." He switched on the lights. They were passing through a cut. On Larry's side was a ragged rock escarpment.

Larry looked angrily at the rocks. His desire for oblivion was stronger than ever. He felt the car swerve as the innkeeper yanked his hand from the door. The brakes yelped. The innkeeper handed him a bottle. "Here," he said. "Take a-plenty."

Larry decided vaguely that one kind of oblivion was as good as another. He drank. "Take some more," ordered the innkeeper harshly, after a minute. And that was all Larry ever remembered of the ninety miles to Coffee Corners, save for the one dimly-illumined interval when he found himself fingering a piece of creamy silk cloth, ragged around the edges, that he had no recollection of acquiring.

"What you got?" The innkeeper reached for the dashboard light. Larry held the cloth under the light. It was a torn-away section of a dress. On it were embroidered initials. He remembered the face of the Frenchwoman in the store where he had bought this blouse. . . .

THE innkeeper was shaking him. On the bed table was a tray; flanking the coffee pot, a brown bottle. "Figgered you could use a shot," said the innkeeper, pointing. "It's nearly three in the morning."

Larry made swift use of the bottle, as though there were enough whiskey in the world to wash away last night. He tried the coffee, but his stomach rebelled.

The innkeeper loitered conversationally. "Your lawyer friend left this morning. Sore. Said you knew where to find him. And Forman's gone." His hand strayed to the bottle. "The clinic called him this morning. Seems Foss decided against operating. They're sending the Forman girl back to some State hospital today. Forman's making the trip with her in the clinic ambulance. Besides," he looked past Larry, "I guess Foss had to make room at the clinic for your—for Miss Laing."

Larry said dully, "Isn't he going to keep Judith at Pine Hill?"

"It ain't Foss's idea to bring her back. It's Doc August's. Doc August won't keep incurables or—ah—violents. Anyhow, Foss had to send for her right away."

"How do you know?"

"Dave called me this morning. Incidentally, they didn't spot you. They thought Miss Laing had got loose by her-

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self. Seems that after you bunked out, she got into the living room and on the nurse and the attendants from the main building got there just in time. I guess George Foss'll keep her at the clinic here a day or so until he can sign her in somewhere else." He looked sympathetically at Larry's face, at his restless hands. "Look, Mr. Paul, go back to New York. You'll crack up here, and I don't mean just the drink. Suppose I run you over to Beddleton, there's a train around five."

"Why not?" He thought it over.

But when he finished dressing and packing, there remained the thing on the bedpost, challenging him to a decision. He took what he promised himself would be his last drink, and looked around for a wastebasket. But his hand refused to throw it away. What was it her letter acknowledging his present had said? Something about a talisman. . . .

The innkeeper called up, "Almost ready, Mr. Paul?"

As though on cue, he remembered—so clearly that even the details of her handwriting were distinct in his mind. He read, as from a printed page: *"Thank you again for the lovely gift. I'll keep it by me as a talisman. Strictly honeymoon gear—"*

Larry held his breath, lest the functioning of delicate machinery in his brain be disturbed. It was really quite simple now. Like a game of solitaire that runs itself out when the key card turns up.

Larry went downstairs and began to use the telephone, brushing aside the innkeeper. When he hung up for the last time, he said, "They expect Dr. Foss over at the Kaskcopac Hospital around four. I'd like to go there, please."

The innkeeper looked hard at him. "You ain't gonna start a row?"

"Just drop me off there." The innkeeper opened his mouth to argue. Larry said reasonably, "What's it to you where you let me out?"

"Okay." The innkeeper was miffed. But when they pulled up in front of a trim limestone building, garishly modern among the white clapboards and old elms of Kaskcopac, he pushed Larry's money away. "I'll wait," he said gruffly. With a crooked grin: "I'm curious."

The hospital receptionist, an elderly woman in a blue dress, said, "Dr. Foss? I'm afraid you'll have to step over to the Foss Addition—you see, that's maintained as a separate unit from us."

"Thank you. Is it far to the Addition?" he asked.

"Oh, no! It adjoins this building. The hall to your left, go through the swinging door at the end, and you'll find Dr. Foss's nurse."

"Thanks." Larry followed directions. The swinging door flapped behind him. A sharp-faced young nurse with a mole finished scribbling on a chart before she looked up from her desk.

"I'd like to see Dr. Foss." He was proud of his even tone.

"I'm afraid you can't." She frowned at the chart.

Calmly, as though his heart had not suspended action for the moment: "Is Miss Judith Laing here?"

"We give out no information. Dr. Foss's orders."

"Then I'll have to see Dr. Foss."

She saw that he meant it, and stood up, hostile. "Dr. Foss is changing for an operation. Will you please go now." When he shook his head she seemed nonplussed. She fiddled irritably with a bunch of keys, dropped them with a clatter on the desk.

Larry said, "I want to see Miss Laing. And I'll tell you right now there probably won't be any operation. Tell Dr. Foss that."

With a sharp, angry intake of breath she left him, hurrying down the gleaming corridor and around a corner as one on her way to give an alarm.

Larry glanced at the chart. He was thrilled, but not surprised, to see typed across the top: "Laing, J. F." and "22." At an angle across the hall was a door numbered 20. That meant, the room beyond—

He waited, expecting any minute to see the nurse return with a royal procession of Dr. Foss and internes. But the hall remained empty. Ominously empty. Larry asked himself quickly what he, in Dr. Foss's position, would do. The answer was as obvious as a policeman's badge.

The keys tempted him. He picked them up. With them in hand, he felt more confident as he went to the door with 22 on it. It was unlocked. There was no nurse inside. Just Judith.

One look at Judith, and he turned his attention to finding the right key. He hit upon it just in time; as he locked the door, he heard the footfalls in the corridor.

Judith lay on her back in the bed, her face peaceful, unravaged. The bed-coverings were smooth as new-fallen snow. He said, "Darling!" but she did not respond. Her head was enveloped in a white cap of a sort he had never seen before. No strands of blonde hair were visible around its edges, and he knew that her head had been shaved.

She did not stir when he thumbed back her eyelids. Her pupils told of a heavy sedative.

Voices came down the corridor. The sharp-faced nurse said, "Maybe he ran away, he looked sort of—" Larry could not catch the rest. A hand tried the door. There was a silence, hollow yet pregnant. Then came Foss's voice, flat and hard: "Paul, are you in there?"

Instead of answering, Larry walked to the window, letting the sound of his feet answer for him. The window overlooked the front of the hospital. Behind the innkeeper's car was parked a long, black coupe, Foss's, he was sure; and behind that, a green convertible, its top down. In it a woman was lighting a cigarette. Although foreshortened by the angle, Mrs. Dane's face was long and handsome, and Larry thought he could see something rapacious about the jaw.

He heard Foss say something to his entourage, and caught the word, "psychopathic." A male, evidently an intern, said eagerly, "Want me to break it in, Doctor? I—"

"We'll wait for the state police," said Foss loudly. "They'll be here shortly. Then: "Paul, you're crazy. You can't stop this operation."

Larry went over to the door. "But I'm going to."

Foss mutered to someone beside him, "The man's no good. And he obviously needs treatment himself." There was hushed agreement, like a response in church. The intern was still anxious to show off. Foss said sharply, "Let the police do it. I'll need you in the operating room. Once they take this man away—"

Here it dawned on Larry, for the first time, that this could actually happen. It had not occurred to him that he might have trouble getting anyone to believe his charges. But now, through the crack in his confidence, a different picture appeared. Once they broke in, once Foss told the police he was the man in New York. . . .

He called, trying to convince himself, "You can't get away with this."

"Why not come out?" said Foss, as one patient with a madman.

"You haven't got the nerve. And I know about the Forman girl."

Foss hesitated before he said, very earnestly, "Paul, use your brain. You know I'm trying to help Judith. Dr. August agrees with me that an operation is her only hope. Can't you understand that?"

"Mrs. Dane's waiting for you outside," said Larry nastily. "Does she expect you to bring the money out with you?"

Said Foss, on a higher note, "Do you

think a man like August would sign papers for this operation unless he was satisfied in his own mind?"

"Oh, shut up." Larry was suddenly weary beyond endurance. Too many things had come to a head too quickly. Far off there was a single thin wail of a siren. He was shaky—increasingly so. He forced himself to think. His only chance was, when the door yielded, to get, somehow, to Foss, and injure him sufficiently to postpone the operation. If, of course he could get to him.

"CERTAINLY August signed the papers," Larry said doggedly. "You put the Forman girl in Pine Hill under Judith's name. You even sent some of Judith's initialed things along to cinch it. Don't you think I—" he caught his breath—"can prove you've had Judith at the Foss Clinic all week under opiates of some kind, ever since she came to you Monday night?" The silence in the hall had become a restless silence. "It was Mrs. Dane, wasn't it, Doctor? She was draining you. You couldn't pad the clinic books enough to cover Mrs. Dane's expenses. You knew Judith would shut off supplies when she found she was putting up for Mrs. Dane, too. So when this Forman business came along—"

"You are insane!" But there was a hint of desperation in Foss's voice now. "Come out of there!"

"August was honest. He signed the papers for an incurable case that he had been told was your niece. Doctor, I'd like to bet you've made arrangements for Judith, after this operation, to be taken to some place far, far away—some sanitarium in the West, in California." From the silence Larry knew he had guessed right.

"Why not Pine Hill? You say it's a good place. Judith won't be 'incurable' then. She'll be gentle, like a child. She'll stay that way. Like a child. While you and Mrs. Dane take over her affairs."

Larry would have given much to see Foss's face; more to see the faces of the others at the door.

"No, Doctor, not Pine Hill. Dr. August might wonder why he signed papers for one girl and she turned out to be somebody else. Can't you see your whole idea's flimsy?" Keep talking. If he could just get one intern doubtful. . . . "I'll make a deal. Call Dr. August. Get him over here. If he'll identify Judith as the girl he's had under treatment in Rose Cottage since Tuesday, I'll say go ahead and operate."

Foss said harshly to someone, "Wait here. I'll go down front and meet the police. Don't let that man in there escape."

The intern waited until he was out of earshot. Then he said shakily. "Any of you kids got a cigarette?"

Larry went to the window, leaned his elbows on the sill, with a queer feeling that he had ceased to figure in this affair, save as a spectator. When the police arrived, it would be different. It would be necessary then to get to Foss and cling to him, blackjacks or guns or fists notwithstanding.

Below and to his right, on the hospital porch, Foss appeared in the late afternoon sunshine. In his white surgeon's blouse, buttoned Russian-style at the side of the throat, he looked young and vigorous, save for the color of his face.

The siren sounded closer. Foss hesitated, then jumped down the steps.

Mrs. Dane saw him, sat up straighter. She waved, called out. Foss ignored her for the moment. He went to his black coupe and got in.

Larry thought, with a great, gasping surprise, "He's going to take it on the lam." But even as the thought crossed his mind, Foss got out and went back to Mrs. Dane's car.

From her actions, Larry divined that she now saw the doctor's color, his expression. Even before she saw the gun, Mrs. Dane threw up her hands in a futile,

terrified way. When she saw the gun, she cried out, her contralto cracking hoarsely, like a crow's call.

When the shot came, she flapped her hands, like a crow's wings, as she fell back on the red leather seat, twisting as she fell.

There was a silence, as though the whole hospital were holding its breath. The innkeeper's head had popped out and into view, but he made no other move, nor did he cry out.

Then came the second shot.

The group in the hall outside Judith's room broke up. The hospital, alive again, swelled with many sounds. The innkeeper got out of his car, pale and fearful, just as the police car swung in from the main highway. He gestured weakly to draw the attention of the police to the green convertible.

Larry sat down by the bed. He got up, kissed Judith on the cheek, then sat on the edge of the bed, staring at her face, her lips.

Maybe she had been a little nervous. But he knew now that Foss's glib talk of a breakdown had been a lie. Foss must have talked her into believing she was more nervous than she really was. Undoubtedly, he figured that eventually—

But her news about Larry's return, the prospect of her marriage, had forced Foss's hand. On Monday night, he must have given her what he told her was a "mild" sleeping pill. From then on, he kept her under; and sent the Forman child down to Pine Hill at once under Judith's name and with some of her things, including the pajamas.

The ruckus last night had proved an unexpected break for Foss. It had probably crystallized August's opinion that an operation was necessary; and had enabled Foss to take the Forman girl back quickly, without seeming to initiate the transfer. With the papers signed, he had simply told Forman that he had decided against operating, and shipped her back to the State hospital. Then made hasty arrangements to operate on Judith.

And, whatever his indecision, Mrs. Dane must have helped dissolve it with that delicate, sardonic: "How fortunate it isn't your niece."

So they had brought Judith over and prepared her.

Larry tweaked up the edge of Judith's queer cap. He could see no hair. He smiled feebly, pityingly. No trouble getting Judith to Arizona now. She'd demand seclusion till her hair grew back.

Well, seclusion would suit him fine, as long as it included Judith.

Queer, sitting here beside a partly-bald fiancée, waiting for the cops, waiting, maybe for hours, until she regained consciousness. God, but he had a lot of things to do. It wouldn't be easy, getting his side of the New York affair straightened out. And explaining to his boss. And fixing up the book with everything else going on. And explaining to Judith about the fight at Maxim's.

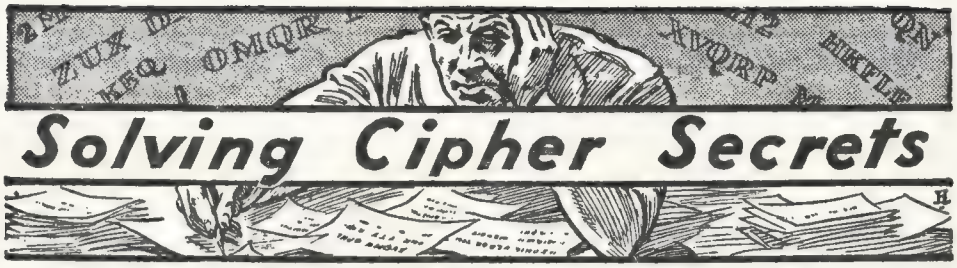
Of course, Elsa Tirrell would be a big help. And of course there would be some record of the ex-attendant's physical condition. And a note from the ambassador to his boss at the I.P. would take care of that other thing.

And Judith was here, safe, lovely, unmarked—if you excepted the matter of the hair.

In short, what in hell was he worrying about?

Larry patted Judith's cheek, let his hand linger against it. She moved, just the least little bit. She did not open her eyes, but it seemed to him that she moved comfortably, happily, as though she were subconsciously aware that he was present.

He bent over, kissed her lightly on the lips. Again she stirred a little, once more relaxed. Well, it wouldn't be too long now. He smiled. "Hi, Baldy," he said, and settled himself to wait.



Founded in 1924 **Article No. 842**

M. E. Ohaver

A CIPHER is a secret writing. The way to solve ciphers is to experiment with substitute letters until real words begin to appear. In solving, notice the frequency of certain letters. For instance, the letters e, t, a, o, n, i, are the most used in our language. So if the puzzle maker has used X to represent e, X will probably appear very frequently. Combinations of letters will also give you clues. Thus, the affixes -ing, -ion, -ally are frequent. Helpful hints appear in this department each month. Study them carefully.

CRYPTOGRAMS

No. 5223—Torn to Tatters. By Joseph Miller. Beginners should try one-letter word Z as *"a,"* and ending -'D as "-s." Substituting throughout, DAZAT (*s -a - -*), noting repeated symbol A, suggests *"state."* Next, complete BAFTY'D and ABYT.

*BNUZFBKZ *XPAR FLOOR ZGV JPHTR DAZSTV VBKTDAPX DAYPE ZXA, ABYT LE TZXF BAFTY'D XUBAFTD. EBUPXT OYBNT LE AFT HYTT-HBY-ZUU, UTHA AFT AJB DAZGVPGS PG Z DAZAT BH GZALYT BG AFT YZS-UPAATYTV HUBBY.

No. 5224—Spring Signals. By Scheherazade. Enter through Z and ZOV, also UNT, UB, and UNDBHPN. Substitute in ZPZLOKU and supply missing letters, using NLPN as a check word.

"CLOUDS YBHPNK ZPZLOKU Z CLOUDS KGS; STU UNT KGS LK AZDUFS YFHT ZOV UNT XFBHVK ZDT AZDUFS YDLPNU. CNB XZO UTFF YHU KZA LK EBHOULOP NLPN, DTZVS UB YHDKU UNDBHPN?"—*XNDLKULOZ *DBKKTUUL.

No. 5225—Crackling Cold. By Cosmopolite. Pattern AUEA having firist and last letters alike, unlock AUN, with UNEK and FKNEAU following at once. Thus to KNHZKA, MNTKNNP, etc.

HZVEK KNTOZY NLHVZKNKP KNHZKA AUEA OY NLAKNXNVR VZC ANXHNKEADKNP ZS POLAR. MNTKNNP ZK XZKN FNVZC. BNKZ, ZYN GEY UNEK AUN FKNEAU SKNNBN.

No. 5226—How It Began. By Tenderfoot. Compare VBY and UBN, AV and VN. Then complete WAYW and VYSS, by substituting and filling in. Next, ZYFYPVST and *XUYYPYT.

*HNBP *H. *XUYYPYT, LNSAFY HOWDY UBN ZYFYPVST WAYW AP *LAVVXGOZDB, AX ZYLOVYWST ZYXLNPXAGSY ENZ VBY EKRNOX LBZKXY: "VYSS AV VN *XUYYPYT!"

No. 5227—Criminal Slang. By Dr. G. Kiln. Identify two-word phrase BXF ZDU, twice used, noting comma. Then complete sequence NZ NX by supply letter for symbol N.

"ZDU LEPBZED-HOLDUP HBERL NZ NX ZTY RUNLZUPL BXF ZDU LDBER VYHUL CUDNXF," NX EPYYR QBPKYX. VUBXL: "ZDU GNPV'L EBLDNUP EBPPNUL ZDU VYXUA NX ZTY LBZEDUSL. BXF ZDU KOBPF GYSSYTL DNV."

No. 5228—Transitory Trail. By °Valkyrie. Start with DEY and SDEYP, CEYPY and SHYP, all common short words. Then complete CFDYP, CEODY, and TESPY, each lacking one letter.

ASRDSSR AFDE: FLGFANFRY BOAT SHYP TDONN CFDYP NYFHORM CEODY CFUY CEYPY NFPMY FRV DORX CFHYT FRV POAANYT KEFTY YFKE SDEYP DSCFPV DEY TESPY.

No. 5229—Equivocal Query. By Hickory. Compare SO with ending -BSTO. Next, FOR, connective between starred words. Then supply final letter in proper name *FOBTOE.

KPXNBSTO SO *OXU *ETLQ NBFBX LXZXOBN CSNBTLE XAFG: "OFGX BUT FOVSXOB NHTLBN." FONUXL ME LXNTPLVXYPD NBPRXOB: "*FOBTOE FOR *VDXTHFBLF."

No. 5230—Odd English. By W. S. Kristensen. Note OUP used after comma, pattern-word BYOB, affixes DU- and -DUF, etc. Then attack distinctive type-word DUDBDOR.

VAVLUNG, PKASSDUF DUDBDOR "Y," OUP HXSSRGDUF BYOB RNBBNK CNEAKN DUDBDOR TAZNRH, OHLH: "YDEE YODBVY, YOG, YOK, YOK, YD, YNHH, YA, YOUP YNU YODU'B '*OKKDHAU, ZYOB YDU 'NOTNU YDH YDB?"

No. 5231—Deceptive Effort. By †Miss Tick. Tentatively identify alliterative symbol A in this 19-word message by its total frequency of 21. Scrutinize 2nd and 3rd position symbols.

ABCDEFG ABHKCFGB ACLLGNK AOPPNGQ ABCKGROSCB, ABCKSBESGK AKTRUHESBHKS. ABCVFCKHK: AKGOQC AKTRUCAESU AEBBTHFV AGFENST. ABCXGF ABGSGFQEFS, ABCSGKSHFV "AKTRUC" ABCLASNT ABCROBGK ABHKCF.

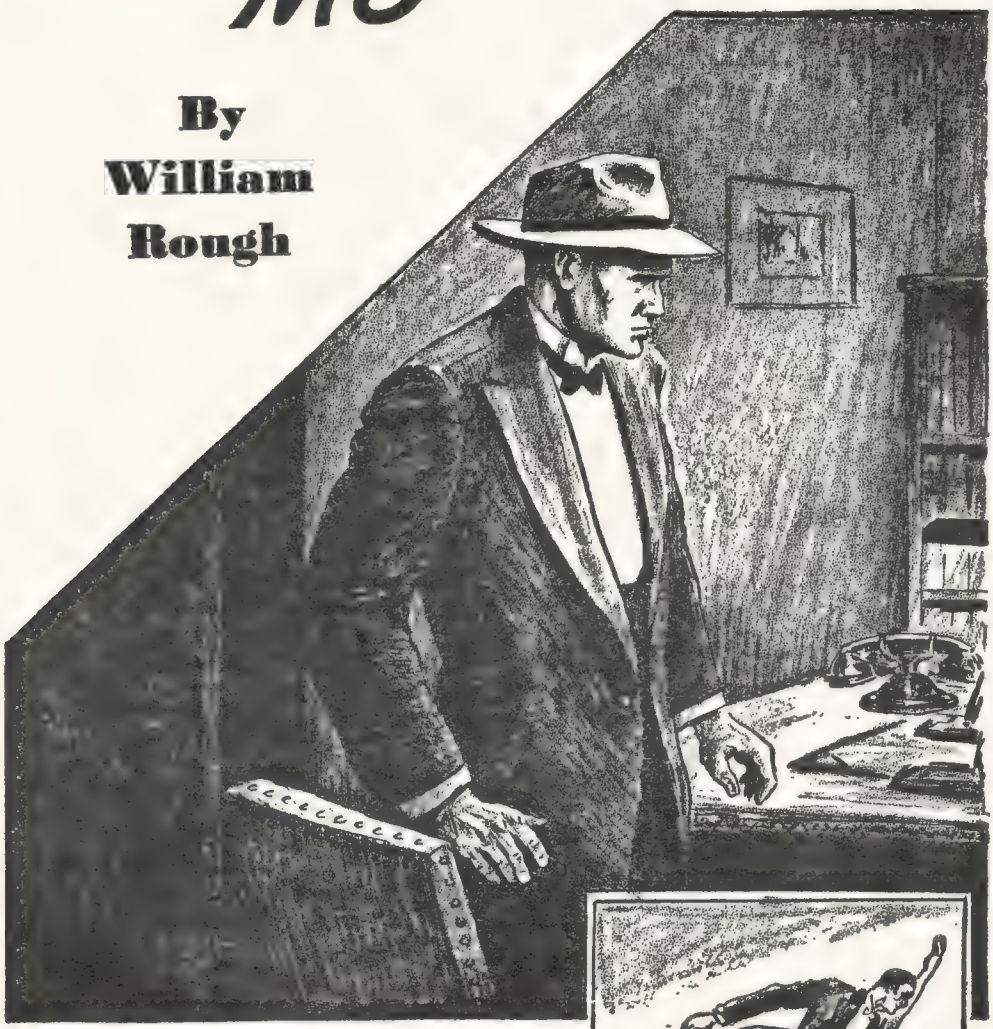
No. 5232—Faithful Portrait. By °Volund. Spot your own clues, fans, in this final catalogic construction. Remember, asterisks prefixed to cipher groups indicate capitalization.

XOL AOLF, ERDKH, GHKAHP, YOEPERNXH VOTNUKHHE, BOYF, YOTPHHT, VOZUTHP, CHV VHKP, NREPZ DOYH, BKSL ASNNRHN YKUPGHL: UKN "NUX DOYH" GRALHKD.

(Continued on page 128)

NO BODY—BUT *ME*

By William Rough



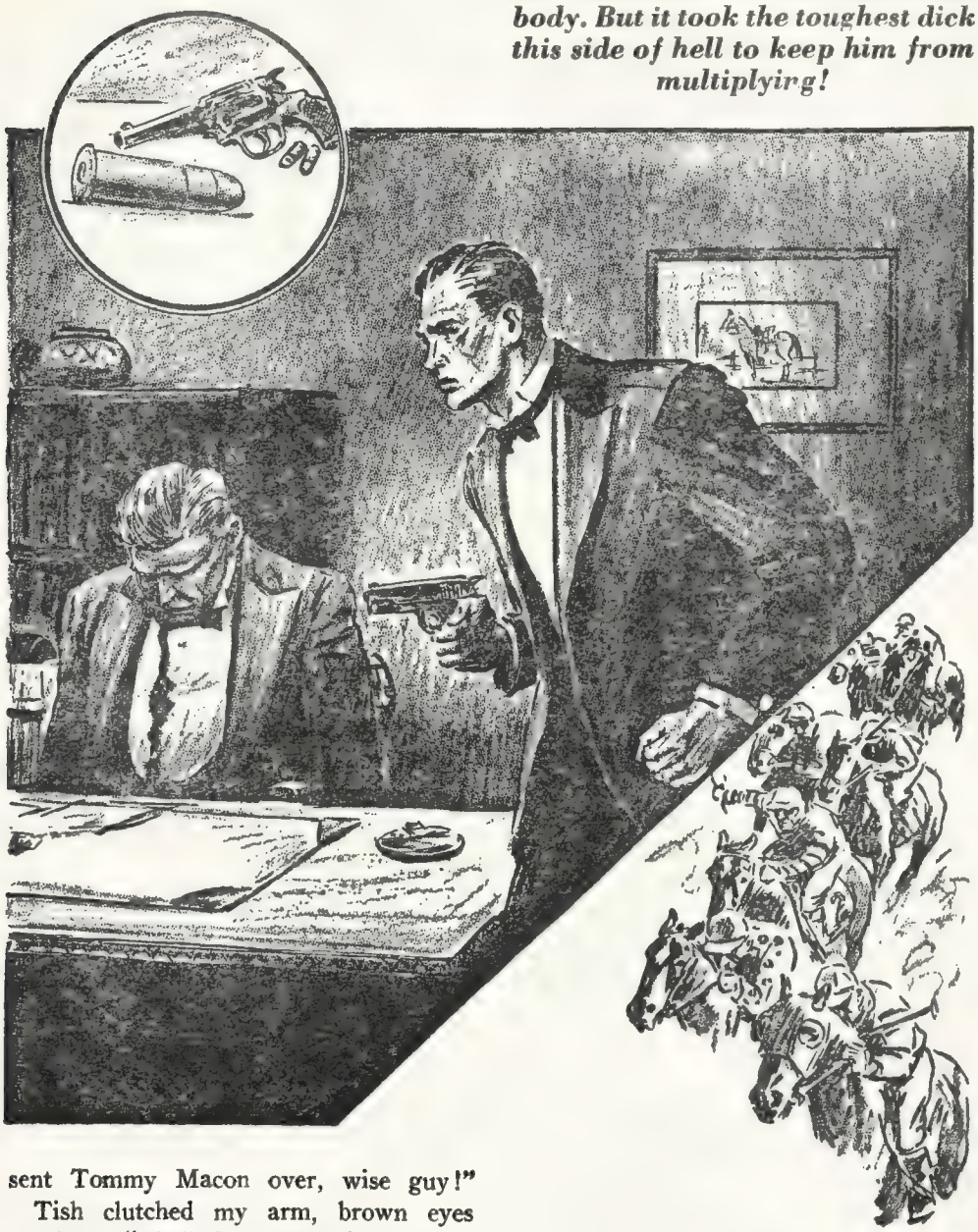
CHAPTER ONE

Death Leads the Race

TISH and I were looking over the skittery two-year-olds in the paddock at the Fairview track when a hand came down on my shoulder from behind and a hard male voice said, "You was warned what would happen if you

"This is all your fault, Harrigan. . . ."

When they added up everything Elmer Allen had ever been—all he amounted to was one dead body. But it took the toughest dick this side of hell to keep him from multiplying!



sent Tommy Macon over, wise guy!"

Tish clutched my arm, brown eyes dilating. "Shall I scream for a cop, Snaps?"

I'd recognized the man's voice. "Naw," I leered. "I'm gonna let him have it."

Her red lips parted in a big O. If her vocal chords had synchronized, she'd have let go a "Police!" that would have put the babel of the Futurity Day crowd to shame. But she caught the ham in my act at the last second and controlled herself. "Oh!" she gasped. She stamped

one size five slipper as prettily as the chestnut filly, Miss Flora, beyond. Then she turned on the bruiser behind me and advised, "Take off, lug, before we wrap you up for the embalmer!"

Manny Barnes grinned. He stands six-three, goes two-twenty, and could let Tish chin herself on his wrist. "Say, you're all right," he told her. "I figured that any kiddo who married Snapsie-boy here would have stuff."

"I qualify, huh?" Tish mimicked. "I got stuff?"

"This is Manny Barnes, honey," I introduced. "He's a Pinkerton detective, the one I told you about, remember? He taught me all I know."

"G'wan," Manny said modestly.

"Fact," I insisted. "Manny, this is the kiddo that brings my slippers and pipe at night. Her name's Letitia, but don't call her it. I should have had you backing me on that Macon thing. It wouldn't have taken half so long."

Manny pretended he didn't agree. "You did fine. You'll get more business'n you can handle, now. Uh, you ain't got a little here today, huh?"

"No, sir," I assured him. "This is a holiday. It isn't my town and it isn't my county. The kiddo and I are strictly from pleasure."

"Glad to hear it, Snapsie. You earned it. Stayin' overnight?"

"At the Kerry-Bruce," I told him. "Drop around." I looked at Tish archly. "Maybe we can have a hoedown."

"Why, that would be lovely," she glared. "I hate privacy."

Manny admired her inky hair and dusky skin. "No more blondes, hey, Snapsie?" he winked.

"They fade," I said sadly, and removed my shins from the vicinity of Tish's toe. Just then, the bugle called the parade to the post.

Manny cocked his wrestler's head. "Good luck. See you later."

"You bet, kiddo," Tish called after him, but when we were alone, she said, "Don't call me that!"

"When in Rome," I grinned. We hit the crowd sweeping trackwards.

The fee I'd earned on the Macon case had entitled us to splurge on a box, and we mounted the red-white-and-blue-swathed grandstand and occupied it. Tish clutched a two-dollar ticket on Miss Flora as if she were already on the way to the pay window to collect. My own four fifty-dollar tickets on the favorite, Blitzen, were tucked safely out of sight in my watch pocket. We haven't been married long, but then it doesn't take long to learn that wives expect bread to be won by sweat, not canniness.

We watched the scarlet-coated outrider's mincing pony lead the delicate, jittery two-year-olds to the post. The bright racing silks of the jockeys splashed the September sunlight, and beyond them the vivid flowers and deep green grass of the infield rippled in the breeze. Flags and streamers snaked out of the grandstand into the blue sky and pillowy clouds, and the prices changed along the boards as Johnny-come-lately money jingled into the tills.

I settled back and looked over my smug, well-fed neighbors. I found my interest being returned from several points, frowned, then guessed the reason and glanced at Tish. Right, she was crossing her legs.

"Exhibitionist," I told her.

"You look successful, too, dear," she said sweetly. "Is it possible for a private detective to earn enough to make boxes at the races his permanent fare?"

"All it takes is luck, larcency or eighteen hours a day at the grindstone," I said airily. My gaze roved. "See the double chin type on the right—he's luck. On the other side of him is a smart money boy, or I miss my guess. Let's see now— There, the box two down from us to the left, is

the midnight oil burner. The one with the thin, tired face and the blonde—" I broke off as the woman turned a little. "M-m," I said.

"But they fade, darling, remember?" Tish said.

"Not when they support a beauty parlor or two, as she probably does," I countered. "She could get a guy a nervous breakdown in no time."

"She's thirty-two if she's a day," Tish sniffed. "Her husband is fifty and looks older. If you want to look like him in twenty years, darling, I'll keep my face and figure, too. Watch the race."

The colts and fillies were kicking saucily at the starting gate. Tightness grew in the crowd and the starter and his assistant watched narrowly. Blitzen, the favorite, kicked up some fuss and there were groans and titters all around us. I was in full sympathy; I didn't want four fifty-dollar tickets disqualified. But then they straightened him out, a hush fell, the gate went up.

They're off!

They broke sweet, for two-year-olds. The jockeys screamed. Blitzen's sleek bronzeness was away on top, neatly taking the rail from Miss Flora.

"Oh, the bully!" Tish cried.

"There are seven furlongs, remember," I consoled.

They were bunched at the first pole, with Miss Flora at the flank of Blitzen. The chestnut filly and the bronze colt were out in front, with the pack behind them led by Sir Knight and Snow Lady.

AT THE quarter, Sir Knight was on the outside. The cheap colts were fading gradually. Sir Knight challenged. Miss Flora hung beside Blitzen, letting Sir Knight move up even with her, then ahead. Blitzen held closely on the pace, unperturbed, as Sir Knight came abreast. Sir Knight's boy was whipping him as they went by the second pole.

He was bidding too soon, of course, but I was uneasy about how Blitzen's jockey would take it. Then I relaxed; my boy was letting the colt out just enough, holding it, not putting on the whip at all.

Snow Lady began to falter. Sir Knight was holding on, but still on the outside, forced to cover extra yardage. Blitzen held to the rail around the last turn into the stretch.

Miss Flora's jockey started cooing to her, putting the boot to her. His whip was poised, but he was holding it for that last furlong. Even so, the filly was coming up. Tish danced at my side. I swore softly.

Miss Flora kept coming. She was going to do it, you could see. Blitzen neither failed or faltered, but the chestnut came on, came up, came even.

The colt and the chestnut strained. Sir Knight was done and lagging. Snow Lady was out of it, too. It was Blitzen and Miss Flora for the money.

The chestnut's jockey used his whip for the first time. The filly took it, not spent at all, it seemed. She forged ahead. A half inch, an inch, two inches. Blitzen's jockey made his whip a dancing lash, screeching aloud, imploring the colt.

But it was no good. Miss Flora was under the wire, the winner!

"We win, Snaps, we win!" Tish chortled.

"Speak for yourself," I said sourly, making the mistake of pulling my tickets from my watch pocket and ripping them viciously.

"Snaps, they're fifty-dollar tickets!" she cried accusingly.

"You're seeing things," I said and tossed the torn tickets, but quick.

"I'm not either!" she flared and made a grab at the fluttering pieces.

Heaven knows I'd have been in for it, but a woman's screech, rising above the won-lost bedlam of the grandstand, stopped Tish dead.

"That man has a gun!"

Suddenly it was quiet around us. The din of the people down on the ground and to each side and up in back of us didn't alter, but the area in which the woman's cry had been audible became a tight vacuum.

Tish grabbed me questioningly and I grunted, "The blonde and her tired hubby."

Things like that happen fast, but often give the impression of slow motion. I couldn't have moved fast enough to stop it, yet it seemed as if I was just standing there goofing like everybody else.

I saw the man bring a gun up to his head. The sun glittered on its cheap nickeled surface. His white Panama hat tilted askew as the gun bumped it. The blonde grabbed at him, missed and lurched past him, carried by her momentum to the concrete steps. She stumbled down about three of them and fell on her face. The gun went off and a man in an adjoining box yelped in pain and clutched at his shoulder.

I sensed what had happened from the sound of the explosion. It wasn't the clean, flat crack a small gun would make, but a dull, thickish *blo-o-omph*! And there was no small, burnt hole in the suicide's temple, but a splotchy gash.

I jumped over railings and got down to his box. When I saw that a couple of fingers on his gun hand were stumps, I knew what had happened: the gun had burst. Cheap to begin with, it probably had been old, rusted and clogged, too, and had gone to pieces in the suicide's hand. The man in the neighboring box who had yelled and grabbed his shoulder had undoubtedly been pinked by a piece of flying metal from the defective gun.

Manny Barnes bellowed from the ground. "Don't nobody move up there!"

He produced, of course, just what he wanted to prevent: curses, shouting, shoving and a withdrawal in force by the surrounding citizens. I started to retreat myself; this wasn't for me. The guy had stood up in a crowd in broad daylight and killed himself. The gun bursting alongside his temple had driven metal into his skull, not the way he'd planned, maybe, but effectively.

The twisted frame of the gun lay beside him. The cylinder was sprung and cartridges had spilled out. One of them stood on end, its conical nose pointing at the sun. I plucked it up, like any morbid kibitzer might have done, and felt an odd sensation between my shoulders, as if someone's eyes were boring into me. I grimaced at that and shook it off. Death always makes me feel touchy. I looked once more at the suicide, a small-boned man who'd burn no more midnight oil making money for boxes at the races. I bent over and put his white Panama hat over his face.

I WAS all for folding our tents like the Arabs and as silently stealing away, but Tish had taken on resuscitation work. She was on the steps beside the blonde, saying whatever women say to each other at times like these. I couldn't very well walk off on her, so I was there when Manny Barnes hove to.

He gave a look and a curse and asked me, "See it?"

"He did it himself," I nodded.

"He had a hell of a nerve to do it here." Manny snatched up the Panama hat, slapped it back again. "Elmer Allen," he growled. "See what happens when bankers try to be horse players."

"He was a banker?" I murmured.

"Cashier of the Fairview National. I'm glad I ain't on the board right now."

"You think he had sticky fingers?" I asked.

"We might never know, kiddo, but when a guy does the Dutch in a box at the races after the favorite gets nosed out, we make guesses." Manny looked at the man in the next box who had removed a

sports jacket and was examining a strawberry mark on his biceps. He was about the only one of the original witnesses left, though others had crowded around, now.

"What's the matter with him?" Manny asked me.

I told him what I thought had happened and he stepped to the box and spoke to the man, then peered at the floor of the box, bent over and came up with a piece of gun barrel. He matched it with the gun frame, just for size. "You guessed it, Snapsie. Lookit the inside of that barrel, too. It's corroded to hell."

"Lucky it didn't burst into more pieces and do somebody real damage," I said. "The guy who got pinked ought to settle for a hundred bucks. See you around, Manny."

"You'll see me at the inquest," he agreed.

"Aw, now, look—"

"You're a witness," he cut in firmly. "Don't worry, it's only a formality."

"Snaps!" It was Tish calling. "Help me with Mrs. Allen, will you?"

I looked around. She had the blonde on her feet, but not too steadily. The woman's face was chalk, her eyes vacant with shock. A runner which she'd got on the concrete steps marred the sleekness of one slim leg.

"Want her?" I asked Manny.

"Put her in the clubhouse. I'll be down."

I went over and helped Tish. Mrs. Allen was moaning, "Elmer killed himself—" I looked peevishly at Tish. Heaven knows I see enough grief in the day's work without collecting it on a holiday, too. We might be stuck with this woman for an hour unless—

"Marla!" A good-looking blond six-footer, wearing expensive tan tropical worsteds, bounded up the steps and planked himself in front of us. "Marla, what happened?"

Recognition seeped into Mrs. Allen's green eyes. "Floyd— Oh, Floyd, Elmer killed himself! He must have bet too much money with Nixie and—"

"Not here, Marla!" the man said sharply.

"What does it matter?" Mrs Allen shuddered. "No one knew but me, I guess, but Elmer's been gambling terrifically. He had an enormous bet on Blitzen. I don't know exactly how much, but—"

"Sh-h." The man's eyes were blue, alert, appraising Tish and me. "Excuse me," he said, "I'm afraid we haven't met. Are you friends of Marla's? I'm Floyd Lewis, Mr. Allen's attorney."

"My name's Harrington; this is my wife," I said. "We're friends of the track detective. He asked us to see to Mrs. Allen."

He bristled. "See to her? What do you mean? You're not detaining her."

"Don't be silly," Tish told him. "She was all alone after it happened and we're only helping her."

"I see. Don't misunderstand, please. I'm only trying to get the picture." Lewis bit his lip meditatively, and I decided that it would take an old hand or an airtight case to beat him out in a court of law. "Thank you very much, Mr. Harrington. Mrs. Allen is grateful, but I'd better take her home." Repeating my name seemed to jog his memory. "Say, you're a detective yourself, aren't you? From up-state, in Breverton. Of course. I read about your work in the newspapers recently. Thanks again."

"You've been kind," Mrs. Allen said to me.

I waved it away and they started off. Tish sniffed. "I play Good Samaritan, but she thanks you."

"She sees you're only my stooge," I explained.

"That'll be the day! She's the type who doesn't notice things unless they wear pants. Did you see her diamond ring? I'll bet her poor husband had to gamble to

keep her decorated. That reminds me! Snaps, you said you weren't going to bet more than two dollars, but they were fifty-dollar tickets you tore up."

I shook my head sorrowfully. "I guess you won't be a reliable witness at the inquest," I said. "You see a two and think it's a five."

"Is that so? Well, what do you see here?" She opened her purse and flashed a ticket.

I blinked. It was a fifty-dollar ticket on Miss Flora who had been five to one. "You can see who brings home the bacon in this family," Tish taunted.

I was very respectful.

CHAPTER TWO

A Gun-Toting Secretary

I SHAVED, showered, shampooed, shined and got into my tux while Tish poured herself into a strapless evening gown. I estimated another forty minutes for her to get festive and tried to adjust my bones to one of the fan-back chairs the Kerry-Bruce Hotel throws in with its thirty-dollar-per-diem suites.

The racing extra which the Fairview paper had put out carried only a skimpy item about Elmer Allen killing himself. It did carry, however, pictures of various local bigwigs and visiting firemen who had attended the races. One of the pix was captioned: "Local Promoter and Famous Dance Team." It showed a slender, grey-haired, grey mustached man sitting in a box with a brace of Spaniards. At least they looked like Spaniards, both man and woman being tall, dark-haired and brown. The words under the pic said: "Mr. Charles 'Nixie' Nixon, well-known Fairview business man and his secretary, Arthur Prell, with Ramon and Rena, noted dance team featured at the Kerry-Bruce Flamingo Room, in the former's box at the Futurity this afternoon." The secretary referred to was an athletic, careful-eyed man hovering at Nixon's shoulder.

"Zip me," Tish said, coming over. She looked at the photograph. "Who are they?"

"The guy Elmer lost his shirt to, his bodyguard and a couple of hoofers we'll see downstairs, later," I said. "We have reservations in the Flamingo Room. How about you picking up the check with what you won on Miss Flora?"

"How about telling me what you picked up when you bent over in the Allens' box?" she countered.

"Oh, that," I said. "Just one of the cartridges from his gun. What sharp eyes you've got, grandma."

"I'm a detective's wife. What do you want it for, Snaps, a clue?"

"A clue to what? Don't be silly. Clues are for homicide, not suicide. It was just like people grab pieces of crashed planes and stuff. You know, for souvenirs."

She wrinkled her nose. "There must be some ghoul in you." I zipped her, found her in position and pulled her close.

"I'm not an eggshell," she whispered.

"I don't want to muss your dress," I said.

"The heck with the dress. Kiss me good before I put on lipstick."

When in full plumage, a flamingo is almost all red, but the ones done in mural fashion on the ceiling and walls of the Kerry-Bruce's night spot room were a dozen different colors, even silver and gold. With lush purple drapes at the windows, pussy-footed waiters and gleaming silver and linen, it was just what the Harringtons wished to become accustomed to. It was eight o'clock and filling up when a waiter ushered us to our table and opened menus big as billboards in front of us.

"Anything will do," I told him, "so long as it starts with Martinis and ends with lobster thermidor for Mrs. Harrington and steaks and onions for me."

"Oui, m'sieu."

"Dance?" I invited Tish and we floated over the polished floor, a little out of practice but not so much so that we had to blush as we passed Ramon and Rena's table. Hoofers must keep up their strength, and they were chewing vigorously on red meat and talking to each other in words and ways that weren't American. I cocked an ear as we passed them.

"Spanish?" Tish asked.

"Mex," I corrected.

"They make a slinky couple, don't they?" she said. "There's that Nixon man and his secretary. He doesn't look like a gambler to me."

"Gamblers often don't, these days." I had to admit that the slender, grey-mustached man and the collegiate-looking young buck with him could have passed for dignified father and football son, except that the best tailoring couldn't quite conceal the extra something under the young fellow's armpit. The newspaper picture had labeled him Arthur Prell, secretary. I wondered what kind of typewriter he used.

"Ooo, lookit her, ain't she purty?" Tish mimicked.

I followed her glance to the entrance. Marla Allen and Floyd Lewis were coming in. She wore black but, brothers, they weren't widow's weeds! Black taffeta moulded her, leaving her white arms and shoulders dazzling.

"Cherie!" It was Rena, rising dramatically at the sight of Mrs. Allen. She crossed to her after the fashion of one female rushing to the rescue of another—though not rushing so much that she marred the grace of her sinuous dancer's carriage. "My heart bleeds!" she gushed and hugged Mrs. Allen convulsively. "Your poor Elmer!"

Tish hissed in my ear, "If you knocked yourself off and any woman ran up to me like that, I'd strangle her."

"I think Mrs. Allen would like to, too," I observed. "She's brushing her off. M-m, she and Lewis are sitting at Nixon's table. Don't tell me they want him to kick back what Elmer lost?"

The music stopped, then, and we went back to our table. The cocktails were just right, the food was perfect. We did it justice. Tish, for all her smallness, is an eating woman. Her lobster vanished and she cadged a hunk of steak off me.

"Darn, I forgot my compact, Snaps," she said when she'd finished with her napkin for the last time. She needs makeup like a third leg, but I'd been through this before.

"I'll get it," I said. "Order some brandy."

I nodded to Mrs. Allen and Lewis as I passed Nixon's table. No one there seemed pleasure bent, though there were a lot more drinks than food accounted for. I noticed that Arthur Prell was missing and wondered where he'd gone. I didn't wonder long. I went up to our suite, key ready, but grabbed the doorknob, as you usually do before inserting the key, and felt it turn easily in my hand. Kerry-Bruce doorknobs and locks are very well oiled, and it made no noise. The door swung in and I saw broad shoulders in the bedroom.

A bronze book end was the only thing handy and I scooped it up as I stepped across the living room. "Don't turn around," I warned. "Hold them high."

He was careful in some respects—he obeyed me. He had the jacket I'd been wearing at the track that afternoon and had been going through the pockets. The only off-color move he made was to toss it clear of his foot room as he lifted his hands.

I rammed the corner of the book end into his back. "I wouldn't," I advised, and reached over his right shoulder with my right arm, keeping him tight against me as I snaked his gun from his shoulder rig.

When he turned and saw the book end, he cursed once and didn't look so col-

legiate. It was Arthur Prell, all right, and I was probably more surprised than he was. What could I have that Nixie Nixon would send his dog for?

"You can't make a thing out of this," Prell said without bluster or fear. "I'm walking out."

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "I'd hardly shoot you, but I'd muss your hair the minute you turn."

"And later I'd pay you back with interest."

HIS eyes were hazel with flecks of yellow in them, steady, meaning what he said. I wiggled the gun, a .38, at him and said, "What did you come for?"

"You'll never know," he assured me.

"We'll see," I grinned and raked the gunsight on the knuckles of his right hand. I've seen amateurs try to palm things before, and that's what he'd been doing. He let out a tight yip as the gunsight brought blood. His fingers opened, and something thudded delicately on the thick carpet.

It sounded small and light, but I couldn't guess what it was. So I looked.

I shouldn't have.

He clipped me with a backhand on the jaw. I reeled a little and slashed in his general direction with the gun, but he was on his way to the door. I could have shot him as many times as the gun had slugs, but why should I? I'd only glanced at the object he'd dropped from his hand, but a glance was enough. It was the .32 slug I'd picked up as a souvenir of Elmer Allen's suicide.

When I passed Nixon's table again on my way back to Tish, I stopped, slung my arm fraternally over Arthur Prell's shoulder and dropped his .38 into his lap, shells removed, of course. "Better get some iodine on that hand," I told him pleasantly and sauntered on.

"Why did you stop at their table, Snaps?" Tish asked promptly, when I slid her compact over to her.

"Just being friendly," I said.

She looked at me suspiciously; then her dark eyes fastened on my coat. "Snaps, you put your gun on!"

I grimaced. I hadn't wanted to spoil the evening, but I might have known she wouldn't miss anything. "I had an adventure," I said and told her what had happened. "Maybe that's all there'll be to it," I ended.

"Not if you think a gun is necessary."

"That's just in case there are no book ends handy," I grinned.

"Oh, Snaps!"

"Now, don't be a worry wart. One more screwy development and we'll see the law.

Tish gets scared for two seconds at a time, then forgets it. "Whatever would Prell want with that bullet, though?"

I shrugged and took it out and stood it up on the white tablecloth. "We-ell," I began, and then I thought the damned thing had gone off. A shot certainly had. It cracked right in the room. Then another. My one hand almost bent a piece out of the table as I clutched it. My other was in my armpit. So help me, Ramon almost got himself ventilated. He swaggered out from behind the bandshell, gun in hand, and for a second I thought he was serious. Then I noted his costume: tight trousers, turtle neck sweater, Frenchy cap. He had Rena by the wrist.

"They're only doing an apache number, you clown," Tish hissed at me.

Ramon flung Rena across the room. She fell dramatically and slithered on the smooth floor. Ramon dropped the gun and went after her in a slinky crouch. The orchestra was playing *My Man*. I gulped my brandy down. The shots had been blanks fired from a prop gun to introduce the apache act.

Blanks. After a white it registered. I muttered under my breath and suddenly

found the .32 cartridge much more intriguing that Ramon and Rena. The case was scratched, as if someone had monkeyed with it with a metal instrument. It didn't hug the lead pellet as symmetrically as one of Mr. Winchester's machines would have fit it, either. It looked as if it had been crimped with needle-nose pliers. Even a non-gambling man might have bet that the lead slug had been extracted from the cartridge case for some reason and then replaced.

"Honey," I said to Tish.

"It didn't take you long this time," she said.

"Huh?"

"To get your hunch. What is it and what do we do? You'll be a bundle of nerves till you're satisfied." She shot a glance at Nixon's table. Arthur Prell was looking at us with undisguised intentness. "Me, too," she shivered.

"Don't worry about him," I said. "Come on, I want to make an experiment." I caught our waiter, scribbled my name on the check and we went up to our suite. I needed the key this time, but checked the room over carefully before letting Tish in. Then I got my knife-of-all-trades, one with screwdriver, bottle opener, picklocks and whatnot, and went into the bedroom.

Tish was all eyes as I pried the slug out of the .32 cartridge case, also one out of one of my .38 shells. I sprinkled a little powder from each in ashtrays, examined it.

"Different, aren't they?" I said.

"We-ell, a little, I guess," Tish agreed dubiously. "What does it mean?"

"Watch," I told her and touched a match to each of the little heaps of powder. Of course, it takes something more accurate than the human senses to make sure, but it seemed to me that the powder from the .32 flashed faster than that from the .38. There was also more smoke from the .32 grains.

"What does it mean, Snaps?" Tish frowned.

"I think," I said carefully, "that the regular powder in this shell was removed and blank cartridge powder substituted. We'll have to get an expert to make sure."

"Is that bad?" Tish asked.

I nodded. "Blank cartridges are loaded with very fast, high-pressure powder to compensate for the absence of a bullet and make a loud report. The paper wad in a blank doesn't offer much resistance to the presure, of course, and no harm is done. Understand?"

"I think so."

"But if you put a slug in front of blank cartridge powder, or put blank cartridge powder in the case of a regular bullet—Well," I said, "a fellow in our Rod and Game Club couldn't get shotgun shells during the war and he reloaded a couple old ones with blank cartridge powder. You know him, Paulie Blake."

Tish moistened her lips. "That man with only one eye, Snaps?"

"Uh-huh. He also has a re-made nose, which you can't notice. He was in the hospital for five months after he pulled the trigger on those reloaded shells, and the shotgun he used went to the scrap drive."

Tish's eyes were like big, brown saucers. "Then if someone substituted blank powder for the regular powder in Elmer Allen's bullets—"

"Knowing he was using an old, cheap gun with a badly corroded barrel—"

"They were trying to murder him!" she burst.

"Very, very trickily," I agreed. "But did they?"

"HOW do you mean, Snaps? Of course they did."

"How do you mean?" I countered. "He killed himself. We saw him."

"But he—I—" She made her soft un-

derlip go out and in with her tongue, the way she does when she's puzzled. "I'm mixed up," she said.

"Mutual," I consoled. "Somebody rigged Elmer's bullets so that they'd backfire in case he used the gun. What that suggests is that someone expected Elmer to use a gun on him."

"Elmer?" Tish frowned. "From what I saw of him, he was just a tired, little man. Why, he wasn't the type to go around with guns."

"You can't tell what's inside a package from the covering," I reminded her. "And he did go around with a gun. I wonder where he got it. I wonder if he was an embezzler. I am suddenly very curious about Elmer. Let's find Manny Barnes."

Manny Barnes drank beer in the bar at his hotel while I sketched the highlights of our evening. Then he waggled his head and said to Tish sympathetically, "It's a hard habit to break a man of, Mrs. Harrington."

"Habit?" Tish blinked. "I don't understand what—"

"Smoking opium, he means," I cut in. "Don't pay any attention to him. He's just allergic to the work involved."

"I did what I get paid for," Manny protested. "I talked to Nixie and he admitted that Allen bet thirty jeezers with him."

"Thirty thousand?" I whistled.

"Yeah, the guy was trying to make a killing to cover up what he'd been snitching for two years or more. The President of the Fairview National Bank made a quick check. They got accountants working now, but it looks like Allen was into them for about fifteen grand up till today. Today he grabbed thirty more, figuring if he won, he'd be able to cover up and even show a profit."

"And if he lost, he'd kill himself," I nodded. "Wonder where he got the gun?"

"They got guns at banks," Manny said.

"Good guns," I pointed out. "Allen's was an old, cheap hunk of iron. He didn't get it at the bank."

"You wan't to see Lieutenant Krick about it?" Manny said resignedly. "He ain't gonna think much of it, Snapsie. Whether the gun was doctored or not, Allen used it on hisself. What can you make out of it?"

"Nothing," I admitted, "if the parties involved let it drop. The point is that they're not letting it drop. They already made a try at getting that bullet back and next time—" I stopped, not wanting to scare Tish. "Anyhow, I don't want there to be a next time."

Manny shrugged and put away his beer. "All I can say is that I don't see Nixie Nixon ruining his digestion one way or the other. He's an old-timer and has contacts. He wouldn't scare because a guy was gunning for him, and if he wanted the guy fixed, he'd have done it without hocus-pocus."

"With that, I can agree," I said.

Tish said thoughtfully, "Then that means that Arthur Prell is on his own."

Manny chuckled. "You mean Prell is such a conscientious bodyguard that when he thought Allen might lose the bet and come gunning, he fixed Allen's gun to protect Nixie?"

"Don't tease her," I scowled. "What we need is more information."

"Come on." Manny led the way from the bar.

CHAPTER THREE

Murder-Mad

LIEUTENANT of homicide Pat Krick was a slope-shouldered, quiet man with dark, alert eyes. "It's not likely that there'd be blank powder in only one of the bullets, the one you picked up," he said moodily. "So we'll check the others that were recovered. I saw the gun and you're right about the barrel being clogged

bad. It wouldn't surprise me if just a regular bullet had burst it."

He used the inter-office box on his desk to order the gun and cartridges brought in. "I still can't see it as a case for the Bureau," he said. "Allen killed himself, didn't he?" he asked Manny. "You said you have witnesses to that."

"Hell, yes," Manny said, then apologized to Tish: "Excuse the French, Mrs. Harrington."

She winked at him, then gave Krick a persuasive treatment with her eyes. "But why would Mr. Nixon's bodyguard try to get the bullet back?"

Krick grinned, as if it were cute, coming from a baby like her, but then he saw me eyeing him and his dark eyes tightened. "That's a serious charge to make," he said. "Would you have anyone's word besides your own that it was Prell in your room, Mr. Harrington?"

I felt my jaw settle. "So that's how it is."

Krick bristled. "What do you mean?"

"Nixie carries weight around here," I told him levelly. "If it's Prell's word against mine, you'll take his."

His eyes started to smoulder. "Our set up in Fairview isn't any different from any town, Harrington—influential men have influence. But I'll tell you this: since I've been with the department no one, influential or not, has fixed a murder. It'll pay you to remember that!"

I shrugged. I was willing to believe he was square, then doubt entered the picture. A uniformed cop came in and put a manila envelope on the desk.

"These are the pieces of the gun and the bullets which were recovered in the grandstand," Krick said. "Three of them are unfired, one's fired. You picked up a fifth one, and that's what the gun held. If there's blank powder in the three I have here that—"

He went no further, in his normal tone, that is. The rest were throaty, bitter curses. For he'd opened the envelope and emptied its contents on the desk. The pieces of Elmer's gun were there—but no bullets.

Krick's eyes got slightly humid. He started to lay it on the uniformed cop. The poor guy lost weight, but had to admit that he hadn't filed the envelope as he should have. He'd heard the inquest was scheduled for ten in the morning and had shoved the envelope in a desk drawer to save himself steps.

I had plugged up the .32 again, before leaving the hotel, and now I tossed it to Krick. "There's enough powder left to test," I told him. "And while you might be as honest as the well-known day is long, you'd better check your boys. One of them snitched those bullets."

"They did like hell!" Krick rasped. "If you want to know the truth, that envelope was lying on my desk while I had a dozen people in here this afternoon. I was in and out, too, and any of 'em could have grabbed the slugs."

I put my tongue in my cheek. "Were Ramon and Rena here?"

Krick's black brows made a straight line over his nose. His voice was soft again. "What makes you ask that?"

"It's the way I work," I murmured. "Were they here?"

Krick didn't take his eyes off me, but he talked to Manny. "How much do you expect me to take from this friend of yours, Manny?"

"Aw, Pat, he's no wise guy," Manny protested. "He just gets burned up when guys push him around and—"

"Save it, kiddo," I told Manny and took Tish's arm.

On the street, she said, "Why did you antagonize that cop, Snaps?"

"Who does anything unless he's burned up a little?" I grinned. "That's my battle plan so far—burn everybody up and see what happens."

"I thought detecting was more subtle,"

she sighed. "Then you didn't really mean anything by asking about Ramon and Rena?"

"The heck I didn't," I said, hailing a cab. I put her inside, gave the address of the hotel. "Ramon and Rena were with Nixie at the races today, so they're chummy with him. Tonight Rena gushed all over Mrs. Allen, which means they're chummy, too."

"Well, what of it?"

"I thought you were a detective's wife," I clucked. "Where did Elmer get the gun? Where did he, or whoever doctored the bullets, get the blank cartridge powder?"

Tish's lips parted. "Ramon and Rena use blanks in their act."

"Now you've got it," I encouraged. "They also use a cheap gun which they wouldn't bother to clean, and acts like that generally have a spare gun in the suitcase. Right?"

"Can you prove it, Snaps?"

"I can tell Ramon and Rena that Lieutenant Krick is trying to prove it," I said succinctly.

"And then watch how they react?" she asked eagerly.

"Something like that," I admitted. "The darned trouble is that there's not enough pressure involved. In an out and out murder, everybody struggles to protect himself. In a mere suicide, who's going to take a Brodie?"

"Then you've got to prove it's murder," Tish said firmly.

I grimaced. "As one miracle-maker to another, how would you suggest—"

But the cab pulled up in front of the Kerry-Bruce and I let it go. Arthur Prell was waiting for us in the lobby. He wasn't menacing, but he was firm. Nixie Nixon wanted to see me. Just me, not Tish.

"I'm going too," she insisted.

"Only one Daniel at a time in the lion's den," I vetoed. She tensed. "There, I'm only kidding," I added quickly. I turned her toward the Flamingo Room, kissed the the back of her neck. "Get us a table or bar stool. I'll be back down to have a nightcap with you."

PRELL'S yellow-flecked eyes followed her legs and straight back. He didn't hate women. Probably they didn't hate him, either. His wide shoulders looked good in evening clothes and he could easily pass for the junior executive type.

We could see the dance floor of the Flamingo Room beyond, and just then Ramon and Rena glided out for a number. The woman was in a white evening gown now, her blue-black hair making a glistening coil at the base of her neck. Her shape was a little full for my taste, but the muscles underneath her skin were supple and strong.

"Not bad," I murmured to Prell.

"You're a lucky guy," he said.

I saw then that he was still looking at Tish, not Rena. "I mean the Spanish type," I said.

His eyes were a bit dreamy. "She'll pass, too," he agreed.

"Only Ramon would probably be jealous," I pressed.

"He'd slide in behind you with a knife, maybe," Prell said judiciously. "He wouldn't come at you from the front."

"M-m," I said. "Why didn't Rena send him up after the bullet instead of you? Doesn't she trust him?"

"Guess again," he taunted.

"What does Nixie want with me?" I asked.

"Come on and find out."

We moved toward an elevator. "He wouldn't want to explain why you tried to snitch that bullet, would he?" I continued. "If he does, we'd better call Lieutenant Krick, too. He's interested— Oh, not in my little inconvenience," I explained. "He just doesn't like evidence stolen from his own desk."

"Don't work so hard," Prell advised. "You'll knock yourself out."

We rose to the upper stories where Nixon had a penthouse. Prell used a slim, flat key to open the door to a very luxurious living room. He let me pass him, then shut the door again.

"I suppose you rate hospitality so far," he said. He waved at a taboret. "There it is. I'll tell the chief you're here."

I made as if to attack the taboret, but when he swung toward a door leading into the place, I nipped after him. That was why I saw it as soon as he did. Nixon's body, I mean.

Death is generally a surprise; murder is always a shock. I felt the hackles lift on my neck. We were fifteen feet from the flat-topped executive desk at which Nixon sat dead, but there was no mistaking the mess on his grey mustache, nor that a bullet close to his nose had made it. He had fallen back against the leather-upholstered desk chair and had not slumped much. In white tie and gleaming dress shirt, he looked almost distinguished.

I recovered before Prell and stepped back a little, just in case. But he wasn't even thinking of me. A sobbing sound came from way down there in his chest and he shambled to the desk and touched Nixon gently as he would a baby. There must have been a relationship stronger than that of employer and employee between them. Prell was hit hard.

I stepped closer. If Nixon had been shot to prevent him from revealing something, the killer should have checked his handiwork more closely; a slug in the nose generally does the job, but very few wounds bring death instantly, nor had this one. There was a pen handy on the desk and Nixie Nixon had found strength to scrawl a few words on the desk blotter, after his murderer had regarded the job as done and had fled.

Sprawling, slanting drunkenly, the words still were legible. They said:

Allen didn't bet—said he'd pay 10,000 owed me if I told court he lost 30—

That's all there was. Added in the right columns, it made an interesting contribution to my bookkeeping. But there was no time to enter it properly; Arthur Prell was heading for the door again, skin taut over his cheekbones. He was a man on his way to kill someone.

"Remember me?" I said softly.

He stopped. His eyes were flat and shiny. He brought his gun into his hand liquidly as I've seen them do lately, and his knuckles were white on it.

"This is kind of all your fault, Harrigan," he said dully.

"Easy, now," I said. He was really keyed up. "I feel for the old buck, too," I assured him. "But how can you blame me?"

"You picked up that bullet."

"Did you see me?"

"Hell, no. I was down in the chief's box. We didn't even get wind of what was happening up in your part of the grandstand."

I KEPT talking, trying to learn things, of course, but trying a lot harder to distract him so that I could move a muscle without getting shot.

"That might be important," I said. "Ramon and Rena were in the box with you, too, weren't they?" He nodded and I asked, "Did they have anything against your boss?"

He didn't give it a thought. "They were just show folks. The chief was in vaudeville himself, years ago, and made friends with entertainers all the time. He was a swell old man."

"Gave you some breaks?" I murmured.

"Plenty of them." Prell's eyes went to the desk and back again quickly. "I'm not much, but I'd be less if he hadn't picked me up. He got me out of reform school, put manners on me and sent me to college. He's been carrying me since I got out of the army. I've got to pay back for him. That's all I can do, now."

"Sure," I said quietly. "But doing it your way doesn't get back much."

His eyes flickered questioningly.

I said, "If you shoot whoever did it, it's easy for the guy. The wait in the death house would be harder."

Prell wet his lips. "I've got to do it now, while I'm hit."

I was two steps closer to him. "Why?" I pressed.

"I might soften up."

My eyes widened. There it was. What conflicted with his loyalty to Nixon strongly enough to—"Maybe you're wrong," I said quickly. "Maybe you've got the wrong party."

His nostrils flared. "I know who was here when I came down to wait for you. No one else could have got in—"

"But let's handle it right," I said. "Let's get Lieutenant Krick in. You won't go soft. I won't, even if you do."

"No! Turn around!"

He came at me. He should have made me turn, but he was too wrought up. He intended to use the gun barrel, not the bullets, and when he whipped it up, I jabbed stiff fingers under his chin. I got his Adam's apple, closed, used my knee. Then, with my left arm curled around his neck, my shoulder hard against his gun arm, I brought my right fist to his chin. Twice.

Chimes sounded somewhere in the penthouse. It took me a second to orient myself, then I realized that someone was at the door. Prell was quiet on the floor. I strode out of the room where Nixon had died, closed the door, went through the living room and opened the hall door.

"Arthur!" Mrs. Allen cried before she saw that it wasn't Arthur at all.

"Call me Snaps," I said. "Come in."

"Oh!" She was clutching a black, beaded purse. "I thought— That is, I expected—Arthur," she said. "Isn't he here?"

"He'll be around in a minute," I said, which was a truth I had to keep in mind. "Do you need him again?"

"I—again?" she echoed. "I don't know what you mean."

"Of course you do," I chided gently. "Come in." She entered, wafting sandalwood so close to me it felt like heat. Her bare arms and shoulders were whitely magnificent. "Arthur is, shall we say, enamored of you," I murmured.

Her green eyes were wide, childlike. "He's just a boy, Mr. Harrington."

"A big, competent boy," I nodded. "A great help around the house. Now Floyd Lewis is competent in a different way. The legal brain, and so on. Correct?"

Her lips were brushed on with the technique of an old master. They conveyed a message by merely parting.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Widow Isn't Merry

"AS FOR Ramon," I continued, "being dark, he may prefer the light." I looked at the yellow symphony of her hair. "Elmer, of course, was the hard-thieving hubby. What about Nixie? He wasn't old enough to be immune."

"Can you be a little clearer, Mr. Harrington?" she breathed.

"I want to be very clear," I said, "especially about insurance. Against you, that is. I have some. She's downstairs waiting for me. So save yourself for the male jurors."

A ray of light shifted from one facet to another of the diamond ring she wore and danced off the black beads of the tiny purse. I wondered if there was anything substantial in the purse, like a gun or maybe thirty thousand dollars. Not the latter; that would be stashed away somewhere. A gun, though, probably; allure just can't take the place of more reliable weapons at a certain point. I wanted to

get to that point fast, before Arthur needed another tap. Or maybe his way was better, at that. Juries have a history of being less than objective with beautiful women who can act. The thought reminded me of a point.

"You've been in show busines?" I asked.

"Must we stand here?" she evaded.

"In a chorus line?" I taunted.

It worked. Color stained her cheeks and she replied sharply, "I was a dancer."

I grinned at her. It fit. "Was Ramon ever your partner?" I said. She bit her lip and I added, "Then you undoubtedly had experience with apache numbers and their accoutrements, such as guns and blanks. Maybe you even had such tools left over as souvenirs. If not, you could still get hold of them as an old friend of Ramon's who would drop into his dressing room from time to time."

"You have a fertile imagination, Mr. Harrington," she said.

"Sometimes an asset, sometimes a handicap in our modern world," I acknowledged. "In your case definitely a handicap this afternoon. When you saw me pick up that bullet, you imagined a supersleuth at work and got jittery. A compliment to my modest fame, perhaps, but the truth is that I probably never would have looked at that bullet again if my attention hadn't been forced on it."

I shrugged. "You made the amateur's mistake of trying to cover up too thoroughly by snitching the bullets from Lieutenant Krick's desk when you made your statement, and then sending Arthur to steal back the other one from me. In a way you were right; if those shells had been destroyed, no one could have guessed that your husband's death had been planned."

Her voice was cool. "Elmer committed suicide."

I was still baffled on that point. "I doubt it," I said.

"Hundreds of people saw him."

"Hundreds of people could have seen me pick up that bullet, too," I said, "but you were the one who did. Floyd Lewis didn't come up the steps till we were leaving. Nixon, Arthur, Ramon and Rena weren't in our part of the grandstand. My wife saw me and she was right beside you on the steps, so you saw me, too. That's why it had to be you who sent Arthur prowling."

She swayed a step closer to me. Her perfume was heady. "Mr. Harrington, Snaps—"

"I told you I have insurance against you," I reminded her. "I think Arthur has, too, by now. He knows you were with Nixon when he came downstairs to wait for me. You're counting on keeping him under your thumb, but I don't think you will. You lost him when you killed Nixon. The only thing that would make him afraid of going soft is a woman and—"

From behind me, Arthur said, "And you knocked that out of me. Thanks."

I didn't have to turn to know he had a gun in his hand. Marla Allen's dilating eyes were mirrors for it.

"No, Arthur!" she bleated. "I swear I didn't! It was Floyd! I came back to tell you!"

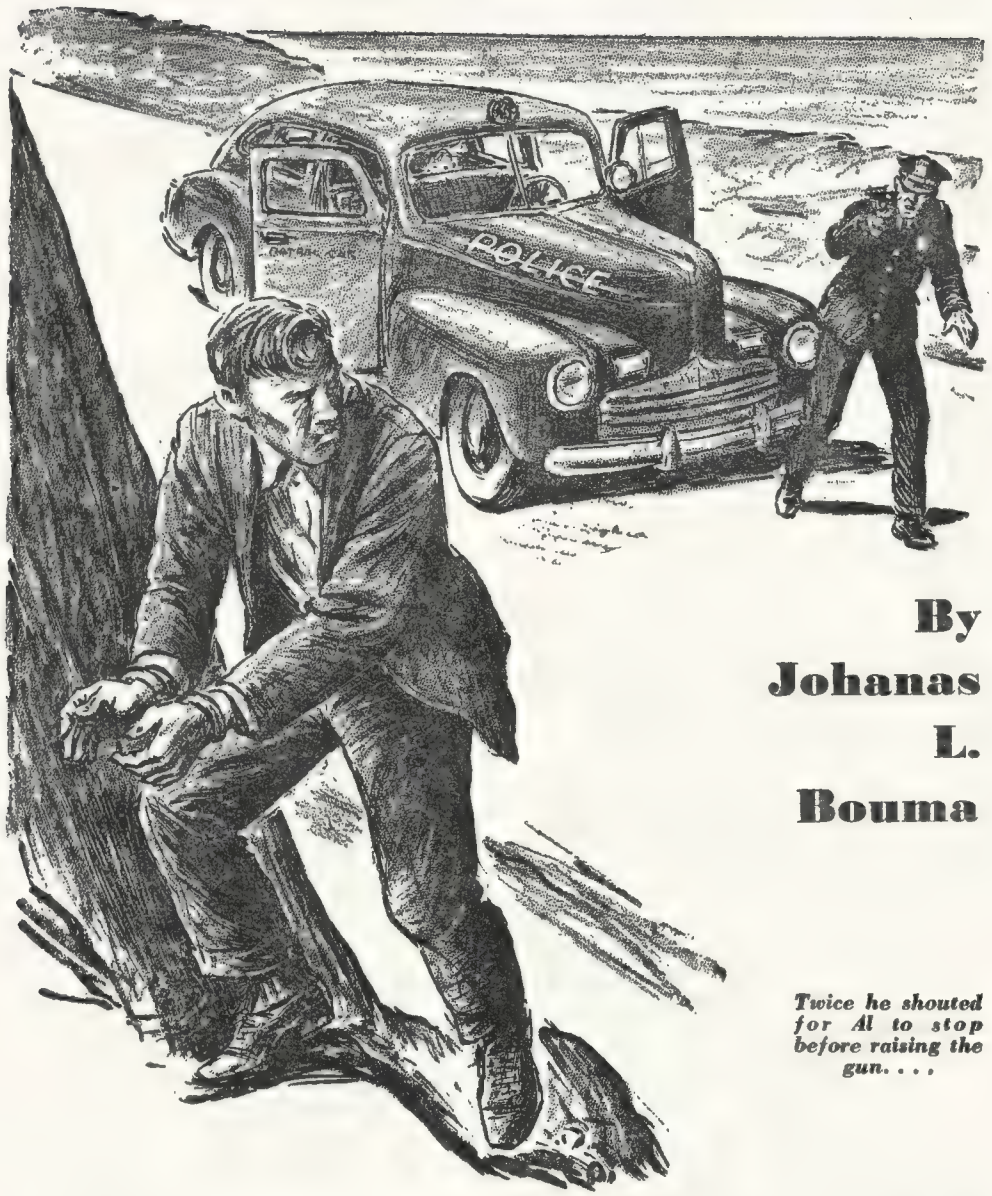
He might have swallowed it; he might not. What happened settled it definitely. The door chimes sounded again. I looked at Arthur for instructions. Maybe I should have been sorry I hadn't hit him harder or kept an eye on him, but I wasn't. Again I felt that his way might be the only way the woman would foot her bill. He nodded at me and I opened the door.

"Well!" I said. "Let the gentleman speak for himself." It was Floyd Lewis.

He saw Mrs. Allen, started to snap something at her, then spied Arthur. He tried to back-track, then, but I hauled him in.

"Speak up," I said. "Romeo or Judas?

(Continued on page 124)



By Johanas L. Bouma

Twice he shouted for Al to stop before raising the gun. . . .

I GUESS I'd never have found out about Al if I hadn't sneaked in the back of the patrol car that time I was playing hide-and-seek with Tommy, the kid next door. Gosh a'mighty! At seven a fellow can be pretty dumb.

Now, at thirteen, I understand better what really happened. One thing, though, I never blamed pop or ever said a word about it till now.

But at seven I didn't even know that Al was just a half brother until one day pop took me along to the station. There were a couple of cops sitting outside his office that had LIEUTENANT HOPSON written on the door, and one of them was saying, "That Al's a heller. He'll be just like his old man," and the other one said about his old man having died on the Rock, and I gave pop a quick look and his

PUNK ON THE RUN

A kid playing tough, a man playing dead—a cop walking his hardest beat as judge, jury—and killer!

face was grey and little red specks danced in his eyes.

I'll say one thing; those cops shut up quick when they saw pop. He just looked at them for a minute; and then he asked them if they didn't have something better to do than sit there gossiping like old hens the whole blasted day. I can tell you pop was plenty mad. When those little red specks go to jumping in his eyes you'd better not cross him, that's all.

When we got inside he leaned back in his chair, looking out the window. For a while he didn't say anything, just sitting there thinking it over, and then he said kind of patient-like that he wasn't Al's father; that Al had a different father who'd gone away a long time ago, but that mom was both our moms and that made Al my half brother.

You can bet that made no sense at all, but I didn't worry about it. I couldn't hardly remember Al except that he was grown-up and had bright little eyes that never did stay put on one spot. I was just a little fellow when he left home, but I remember he said, "So long, punk," instead of calling me "Eddie."

Nobody ever talked about Al around the house, but mom kept a picture of him when he was just a baby. She had it setting on the piano, and whenever I'd have to practice he'd be up there watching me. Sometimes I used to wish he was still a baby and I could play with him.

That was the time, too, when all the grownups talked about the war, and all the big fellows in town went away. Cripes! I was sure mad I couldn't be in the fighting.

Tommy and me used to play at war until pop found out about it. Even telling him we'd killed a bunch of Germans didn't help. He just looked at me kind of sad and said if I wanted a taste of war he'd give it to me on my backside. Nuts! Sometimes grownups won't let a fellow do anything.

That summer our mailman brought the picture. Mom unwrapped it real careful and set it on the piano. Then she stepped back and looked at it, her eyes shiny like maybe she was ready to bawl or something. But she sure looked pretty.

It was a picture of Al, dressed in the uniform of the United States Army.

Mom took the other picture down—the one where Al was a baby—and I kept looking at Al wearing the uniform. How can you tell what you feel? There was Al up there and I should've been busting, and all I felt was a kind of empty hollow inside, he seemed so out of place. I could tell he didn't like it, being up there. Maybe it was the way he looked down at me that didn't make him much company when I practiced.

But even with that and all the war talk it was one swell summer. Mom kept singing around the house and knitting socks and sweaters and stuff like that for the Red Cross. Then when the lady would come around to collect mom would show her Al's picture and they'd stand there looking at it and both of them smiling.

I'd catch pop looking at it, too, and he'd get a funny frown on his face as if he didn't rightly understand what Al was doing wearing a uniform. But pop was gone most of the time. They were plenty short of help down at the station—besides pop there was only Chief Priddle and

three other cops—and sometimes he worked through half a night.

Sometimes the younger cops who had gone away came back to visit pop at the house. They looked different in their uniforms. They walked real snappy-like with their chests out and a serious proud look on their faces. Pop would get beer from the icebox and they'd sit around talking and drinking the beer, and pop would let me sit and listen.

He liked having them to the house, but I don't guess he thought it was fun. He'd grin and slap them on the back when they left, but right after he wouldn't talk to me at all and he'd climb the stairs to his room and stay there all hours.

Darn it anyhow! Why does something always have to happen to mess things up? Everything was so swell that summer before school started. I guess school spoils about most everything.

When I got home that first day there were two men in the living room talking to mom. They acted awfully nice when I came in, but I could see they hadn't done mom any good. Her eyes were red and swollen and when she saw me she said there was bread and milk in the kitchen and for me not to bother them. I never heard her voice so shaky.

I ate the bread and jam and then I couldn't stand it and I opened the door a crack and looked in. Mom wasn't there; I could hear her in the hall talking on the telephone. But one of the men heard me at the door. He got up and I jumped back and sat at the table just as he came in.

He kind of grinned at me and talked around for a minute, asking my name and how I liked school and everything like that. I told him I didn't like it, and if I had anything to say about it I'd quit even if I was only in 2-A. He laughed and asked about pop, and while I was still trying to tell him he asked if I'd seen Al around lately.

I told him gosh no, that Al was fighting in the war, and that's where I'd be if I didn't have to go to that old school. He was all serious then, just like pop, and said I was better off in school. Then he shook hands with me just like grownups and went back to the living room.

After a while pop came home. He talked with the men for a long time, and when they left mom was crying and pop had his arms around her trying to get her quiet. Before I knew it I was crying too.

That night was awful. It was that feeling you get when everybody is upset and unhappy. I couldn't sleep for mom crying in the next room. She was carrying on something fierce, and I could hear pop whispering to her like she was a baby or something. Once she got to talking in a wild voice that made me shiver and want to duck my head under the covers so I wouldn't hear.

Even at seven I wasn't no dummy. I knew right away that something had happened to Al, but I didn't know what. I kept wondering what this F.B.I. was mom kept talking about. Gosh, for all I knew Al had gone and gotten himself shot in the fighting.

The next morning mom didn't come down to breakfast and I asked pop about Al getting shot. I should've kept my mouth shut. But I didn't know it. I guess pop didn't know it, either.

He said, "We don't know what's happened to Al, Eddie." Then he sort of sighed and turned back to the mush he was cooking, and said in a dull voice, "No, he wasn't shot."

It made me feel funny all over the way he said it. Then he told me I should forget about it and not repeat about the two men having been at the house. When I got home from school that day Al's picture was gone from the piano. I didn't know what had happened to it until one Saturday I saw mom taking it from her dresser drawer where she keeps her silk underwear and that kind of stuff.

She was looking at it and wiping it with a cloth and then she started to cry. It choked me up inside. I ran over and threw my arms around her neck and then we both sat there on the floor and cried. Then I asked her if Al was dead, and she said that he wasn't dead, and that she was crying because mothers do that sometimes. But why did it have to make me feel so darn blue?

ONE night Al came home. It was awfully late—around midnight, I guess. The rapping on the back door woke me, and then I could hear pop grumbling and the sound of his slippered feet going down the stairs. After a while he came back up, and I thought he had to go out on a case or something. I could hear him talking to mom, and the next thing they were both going downstairs. I didn't get it, because pop never bothered her when he had to go out like that.

I knew there was something wrong. After a while I slipped out of bed and crept down the stairs. I hunched on the last step, shivering because it was darn cold and wishing I'd brought a blanket to put across my shoulders, because it was mighty cold out from between the covers.

But when I peeked around the edge of the door I forgot all about being cold.

Al was at the kitchen table wolfing down a platter of cold meat and bread mom had set in front of him. She looked terrible and about a hundred years old. Cripes a'mighty, it scared me the way she was standing there and shaking and with that awful look on her face. Pop was at the back door watching Al go after the eats. His face had no color, and his mouth was closed tight and kind of white around the edges.

Nobody said a word. They just stood there watching Al eat. Every once in a while he'd shoot them a quick look, and finally he pushed the platter away and got up.

He was so sloppy I felt sorry for him. His face was thin and dirty, and from the looks of him he hadn't shaved for a week. He had on big clumsy shoes and faded blue pants and that same Army shirt he wore in the picture, but now it was creased and messy. He looked from mom to pop, jerking his head around and wiping his hand across his mouth, and then he kind of whined, "Say something. You gotta help me. I need dough and some clean duds."

Pop just looked at him and Al kept whining and looking every place but at pop. Then pop said, "You're going back, Al."

Al about went crazy. He waved his arms and his eyes jumped, and he called pop names and then he said, "You think I ain't wise to you wanting to bring me in and grab the credit?"

Then he started in on mom. She told him the same thing, that he had to go back, but she sure had a time getting the words out. When he saw it wasn't doing any good he started to slobber just like a kid. Then he got all worked up and mad again, but pop said he'd have to take his chances. Pop said it was bad enough what he'd done to mom, she being so proud of him and all. But Al just laughed in his face.

He walked over and hit pop in the face and pop didn't move an inch and brought his fist back and I thought he was really going to wham Al. But he dropped his hands to his side, and even from where I was watching I could see those red specks jumping in his eyes.

I couldn't move, I tell you. I was frozen stiff from being scared and wondering what it was all about. Then Al kind of backed away from pop and went to begging for another chance and saying that he would get going and really amount to something if he could have another chance.

He said he'd go to Canada or someplace like that and get a job if only they

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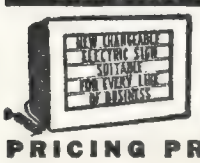

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wouldn't tell about him having been here. That got mom. She started to cry and said all right and then she went and got her purse from the living room and handed Al a bunch of bills.

I looked at pop and saw he didn't like it at all. Once or twice he started to say something and then he'd look at mom and shut his mouth tight. Mom said she'd go up and get some of Al's clothes, and that was the signal for me to beat it upstairs. I was just under the covers when she came in and took some of Al's stuff from the closet. I could hear her fighting to keep back the sobs.

I thought that it must've been plenty bad, but I couldn't seem to get it straight with myself. Maybe that night I felt kind of sorry for myself what with Al going to Canada and everything. It made me forget the way he'd acted, and I thought it must be swell to go wherever you wanted and not worry about school.

The next day mom was down to breakfast, but nobody said anything about what had happened. I sure wanted to ask, but something in pop's face stopped me.

Then at school I forgot all about it because the kids were talking about old man Burch getting his head knocked in the night before. Somebody had found him early that morning in his all night service station out on the highway.

Lord knows how long old man Burch had lived in town. All the big kids used to take their bikes over for him to fix. I guess he'd been around about as long as pop.

I listened to the big kids talking and they said old man Burch had been robbed, and that he had died after they took him to the hospital. They asked me about it because pop was a cop, but how could I tell them anything?

Well, school kept on and it didn't seem like it'd ever get to Christmas. Everybody'd forgot about old man Burch being

killed, and all the kids talked about the war and their big brothers in the army. I had to keep my end up all right. Asking about Al around the house didn't do any good, so I'd make up stories about him fighting the Germans and the Japs. I guess I told some whoppers, and even got to believing them myself. Gee, I sure got to dreaming about Al.

Well, one Saturday morning I was playing hide-and-seek with Tommy. Pop had just drove up in the patrol car and Tommy was out back trying to find me. I swung around through the bushes out front and slipped in the back of the car. There was a blanket hanging from a rack that was fastened to the back of the front seat. It hung clear to the floor board and I ducked behind it and there was just room.

I could hear Tommy running around out there, and me holding my breath and trying to keep from snickering, when the car door opened and pop climbed behind the wheel. Gosh a'mighty! The things a fellow won't do. I should've beat it out of there quick, and all I felt was an excited feeling run all through me. I knew I had no business there, and that if pop caught me he'd give me the devil. It was like taking a dare or something, and not knowing what was going to happen. I forgot all about Tommy.

And then the car started up and we kind of skittered around the corner. After a while we slowed down and I could hear pop shifting the gears and I knew we'd come to Main Street. Then we stopped again, dead still this time, and I thought we must be at the station. Pop climbed out and then I heard somebody walking over and a voice saying, "There's a fellow to pick up at Sunrise Beach. Looks like you'll have to go alone, Jack. The rest of the boys are busy."

I could tell that voice all right. It was Chief Priddle, and then pop said, "What did they pick him up for?"

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Chief Priddle said, "Drunk and disorderly. But the sheriff had suspicions from the way the fellow talked that he might know something about Burch."

And then they were walking away and I couldn't hear another word. I hunched down there behind the blanket, scared and excited, and never thinking about beating it home. I was thinking about pop picking up this fellow that had maybe killed old man Burch.

Sunrise Beach was a little old town down on the coast. Pop had taken me fishing there one time, and all I could remember was a few houses and a store where pop bought bait and the ocean down below the cliffs stretching out so far and so blue it made you swallow just to look at it.

POP climbed back in and we rolled away from the station. I kept quiet as a mouse, not daring to move, and trying to remember each time he made a turn where we were. After a while my knees started to hurt and I stretched my legs, one at a time. They were so stiff that when I stretched them I could feel the blood just running through.

When that salty smell made my nose itch, I knew we were on the coast road. It blew a little, but not much, just enough for it to be what pop calls spanking cold. I pushed the blanket out a little ways, but being below the edge of the window the way I was I could only see the sky. Then I twisted around and looked out the other side and there were the bluffs running up. After a while we were going down hill and made a couple more turns and then we slowed down and came to a stop. Pop climbed out and slammed the door.

I stayed there behind the blanket, not daring to take a peek for fear someone would see me. Then I heard talking and it was pop and another fellow. They went around to the right hand side and the door

opened and in a tight voice pop told someone to climb in.

"Mild as a lamb," a voice said. "Only time he talked was when he was drunk. Ain't said a word since. Got nothing on him, either. Won't tell who he is, and I figured you fellows'd have all the readers and stuff up there to check up on him. Would've let him go this morning, but my deputy said he kept hollering all night about some old man he'd knocked over the head a few months ago."

Pop didn't say anything. I could hear him clear his throat, and then he said, "We'll check on him, Sheriff." Then pop came around and climbed in and we started back.

I'd have given anything to have a look at the fellow up there. I could remember pop showing me how they cuffed prisoners when they hauled them around in a car. He'd run the cuffs up under my belt before snapping them shut, and he said that way they couldn't take a swing at the driver or open the door and jump out.

Nobody said a word up there. We were climbing back up the hill, and when I looked past the edge of the blanket the sandy bluffs were on pop's side.

Then that fellow up there said, "You ain't taking me in, are you? I only kept quiet because I thought you would help me," and for a second I couldn't breathe because I knew it was Al.

At first pop didn't answer, and I was biting my knuckles wondering what he would finally say. I just about died thinking what we'd have to go through if he was brought in, and yet I hoped pop wouldn't let him go. I guess I hated Al for the first time in my life.

Finally pop said, "Did you kill the old man?"

Al started crying and saying that he couldn't help it, that he needed money and what mom had given him wasn't enough. I could hear pop breathing up there, and

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then he said, "You've got to take what's coming to you."

Pop slowed the car to go around a curve. All at once there was the sound of hitting and the door opening and slamming back and feet running from the car. We stopped with a jolt and pop shouted, "Come back here," and then he was out of the car.

I couldn't stand it no more. I came out from behind the blanket and looked over the front seat. Pop was standing in the road and Al was running and then cutting up a path that wound up the side of the bluffs. He was sure traveling and was about halfway up when pop hauled his gun out. Twice more he shouted for Al to stop before raising the gun.

It was like thunder when it went off. Al kind of slipped a little and then he started to roll. He hit the road and kept right on going to the edge. I could see the cuffs gleaming on his wrist and him clawing at the road and pop running for all he was worth, and all at once Al let go with a howl and was gone.

I got sick. It was as if I was falling down that cliff, too, and nothing below me but those rocks and the waves pounding. But the waves were all in my stomach, and I got so sick that I heaved right there in the car.

Pop was walking stiff-legged to the edge and he stood there like a statue with the gun hanging loose from his hand. When he turned back to the car I ducked again.

He drove fast to the station and parked and Chief Priddle was out there and pop told him what had happened.

"It was Al," pop told him.

The chief kind of grunted and didn't say anything for a minute. Then he said, "The two of us'll go down for him. Better if it doesn't get out. I'll talk to the sheriff, and Doc won't say anything."

"The federal boys'll have to know," pop said.

"I guess they will," the Chief said.

Then they were silent as if each one was waiting for the other to say something else. Finally pop said, "I'd better run home first."

"I guess you'd better," the chief said.

Then pop said, "Thanks, Priddle."

Chief Priddle sighed. "It's only right," he said. "By the way—how'd he ever happen to make a pass and get that door open?"

Pop sort of moved around in the seat. He said slowly, "Why, Priddle—I guess I just forgot to cuff him to his belt."

The chief grunted again. "Well, he had a chance."

Then pop drove home. When I heard the front door slam I crawled out and stayed in the garage until he was gone again. I was too scared to face him.

Well, it never did get out. The big surprise, though, was how easy mom took it. Like she'd dropped a heavy load the way she was smiling around the house a few months later. It was pop who acted kind of funny. I'd catch him watching me sometimes, and then one night when mom had gone to a Red Cross meeting, he called me over.

"Eddie," he said, "you're a good boy. You know that?"

I didn't say anything.

"Things happen sometimes and you've got to do what you think is right," he said. "You've got to do it and keep your mouth shut. You understand me?"

I nodded. He squeezed my shoulder and smiled. "God doesn't always frown when you do what you have to do after giving the other man his chance. Now go practice your scales. And, Eddie—next time you make a mess in the car clean it up. Understand?"

I swallowed. "Yes, sir."

The scales came easy that night. I didn't even miss Al's picture not being on the piano.

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(Continued from page 113)

The lady says that you killed Nixon."

Give him a couple of hours to prepare a brief and you wouldn't rattle him. Taken like this, Lewis was mush.

"Arthur's going to try, sentence and execute whoever qualifies," I said. "Scream your heads off."

Lewis' mouth opened automatically but nothing would come forth. Both he and Mrs. Allen focused on Arthur the way helpless birds might stare at a python. He was something to see, too, his eyes filmed, his face bilious from my treatment, a trickle of blood at the corner of a twitching lip. But the gun which I should, or maybe not, have grabbed when I'd knocked him out was steady as in a machine rest. All he needed to do was squeeze the trigger, move the sight an eighth of an inch and squeeze again, and Mrs. Allen and Lewis would be dead.

As for Lewis, he seemed incapable of planning anything. His feet might have been in wet concrete which had hardened since he stepped into the room. His mouth openel again, but she beat him to it.

Her bare arm stabbed out at Lewis. "He did it, Arthur! He's the one Elmer went to for advice when he knew he'd be caught stealing at the bank. He told Elmer to take more money, that he'd get him off with a short sentence and—"

"No!" Lewis found voice, though scarcely a human one. "She's lying, Arthur! I wouldn't murder anyone! I was going to defend Elmer, yes, but he wasn't supposed to die! I told him to build up sympathy by pretending to commit—"

"SHOOT, Arthur!" the woman screamed. "Don't believe him! He was here with me when Nixie sent you for Harrington. He was afraid if Nixie found out about the blank powder in Elmer's bullets, he'd have a hold on him—"

"You hellcat!" Lewis choked. "You were the one who was afraid Nixie would find out and send you to jail to save Arthur from you! You pulled a gun when Arthur left the room and— Look in her bag, Arthur! She might still have it!"

That tore it. Arthur's gun moved the necessary eighth of an inch to the woman. Her eyes fastened on it, dilating and skittering like dying green bugs.

"He lies!" she babbled. "I've got the gun, but he gave it to me after he killed Nixie!" She fumbled with her purse. "Shoot him, Arthur! Kill him!"

She pulled the little gun from her bag. Maybe she just intended to show it, but she cracked. She got it in both hands and pointed it at Floyd Lewis and kept pulling the trigger and screaming above the gun's barks, "Shoot, Arthur!"

Arthur shot—he shot Marla Allen.

It might have been a favor to him if I had stopped him there. He would have been content to die. But Prell had forgotten me and I couldn't shoot. He looked dully at the white, black and red of Marla Allen heaped on the floor. After a while the gun dropped from his hand.

Suddenly there was a small cyclone at the door. I opened it. Tish rushed into my arms.

Marla Allen had been close and cool when she shot Nixon. It was different when she shot Floyd Lewis. Only two slugs had struck him, neither in a vital spot. He and Arthur corroborated the explanation which had been fairly clear when the veneer had peeled off the bunch of them.

Elmer Allen had embezzled money to satisfy his woman's appetites. That wasn't novel. But when he was about to be tripped up, he went to Floyd Lewis to prepare a defense.

Lewis said that with enough money to spread around, he could get Elmer off lightly regardless of the total sum em-

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bezzled. Lewis knew Mrs. Allen—and they worked on Elmer.

Elmer took thirty thousand dollars more in a lump sum. Ten of it was to pay debts to Nixon in return for which Nixon agreed to say that Elmer had lost thirty thousand to him on the Futurity. This was for the benefit of the bank and the bonding company who would hound Elmer and wife forever unless the money seemed to be accounted for. The twenty thousand remaining after Nixon was paid was to defend Elmer and provide for his wife while he was in jail. That wasn't novel, either, since more than one man has felt that so long as he's heading jailward, he may as well take a lot as a little.

The suicide gimmick showed the fine hand of a smooth lawyer building sympathy for his client. If you're ready to kill yourself over something, the average twelve good men and true will believe you're sincerely repentant. Anyhow, that was the deal. Elmer was going to pose as the poor soul who had erred and was so ashamed and broken that he no longer wanted to live. All he had to do was fake suicide, and what better time or place than right after the race at which he's ostensibly lost his ill gotten gains? Who would be observant enough at a time like that to notice that Elmer was merely holding the gun and shooting into the air?

A professional detective might. Or so thought Marla Allen, especially when she saw me glom one of the bullets from Elmer's gun. She, of course, had boiled and bubbled over the fact that Elmer was only going to fake suicide. Why couldn't he really die? She'd be rid of someone who'd be a liability from now on, she wouldn't have to pay Nixie the ten thousand maybe, or Lewis the defense fees.

Given the soil, or the cauldron of a ruthless woman's mind, such a seed will surely sprout.

Ramon identified the gun Elmer had

used as one missing from his dressing room and recalled that Mrs. Allen had questioned him about the chances of his gun ever bursting. They found the empty blank cartridge cases in her ashcan. I should have noticed that her grab at Elmer when he lifted the gun in the box wasn't wholehearted. And she hadn't stumbled past him and fallen on the steps: she'd been getting the hell down so she wouldn't be hit by a piece of the gun.

Nixon hadn't known a phony suicide was scheduled, but when Elmer died, he did know the thirty thousand missing from the bank was floating around. Mrs. Allen was afraid that if Nixon and I exchanged notes, we'd figure the whole thing. She knew that Nixon didn't want Arthur stooging for her and would turn her in if he could get anything on her. So when they left the Flamingo Room, went up to his penthouse, and he insisted Arthur bring me up, she shot him.

Lewis was on hand but had to go along with her to keep from implicating himself. Of course when Arthur put on a little pressure, Mrs. Allen tried to steer him onto Lewis. In any case, the dying message Nixon had scrawled would have told the bonding company dicks to start digging and it would have come out.

I had a monotonous time explaining everything six or seven times to Lieutenant Krick. It was more fun with Tish. I put on my omniscient air and explained how unerringly my cool brain had performed the necessary deductions.

She gave me my innings, then looked at me steadily. "And how long were you alone with that blonde in a penthouse?"

I blinked. "For crying out loud, do you think—" Then I remembered the right answer. I pulled her close. "How long was I alone with the blonde?" I said, nuzzling her hair. "Just long enough to see her fade, kiddo, just long enough to see her fade."

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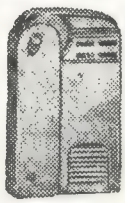

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New Detective Magazine

(Continued from page 97)

WORDS of welcome are in order for the many new fans who are writing in to the deartment, submitting answers, new ciphers for publication, and swelling the ranks of our regulars. But first, let's look at the current special puzzle and the solution to °Jack-Stay's No. X-5222 in the last issue. In the latter, the three picture frames were of the following dimensions in inches: No. 1, 8 x 12; No. 2, 12 x 18; and No. 3, 18 x 27. And °Arrowhead's No. X-5234 is a transposition cipher with self-contained key. To say more would spoil the fun! Full explanation in next issue.

No. X-5234. Transposition Cipher. By °Arrowhead.

A-01	A-25	A-35	A-42	A-46	A-50
A-57	C-04	C-38	D-26	D-32	D-47
D-60	E-03	E-06	E-12	E-17	E-31
E-37	E-40	E-45	E-54	E-56	E-59
F-52	H-09	H-49	I-20	I-23	I-28
I-33	L-43	L-51	L-58	M-27	N-22
O-10	O-14	O-21	P-13	R-05	R-39
R-44	R-53	S-02	S-11	S-15	S-16
S-18	S-19	S-24	S-34	S-36	T-07
T-29	T-30	T-41	V-55	W-08	Y-48

Now, the department mail bag! From Washington, D. C., writes Sport La: "Many fans appear to use code names in answering the puzzles. So I'd like to adopt SPORT LA, made up from the first and last letters in the name of my home town, Shreveport, La. Thank you for this most interesting department."—Sport La will find his answers duly credited in the regularly published *Cipher Solvers' Club.*

†Canco, Seattle, Wash., writes: "Here are my solutions to the current ciphers. Hope you still have a record of the few I sent in 1941. "—†Canco's answers are all duly listed to her credit, but her last solutions were to Nos. 34-42 for Feb., 1942, with a total score of 116, thus winning her a "dagger" and †*Hundred Club* membership. In similar vein, *Shadyside, Cleveland, Ohio, away since Dec., 1943, sends in recent sols with this query: "Do our old answers from years back count?"—They surely do! *Shadyside, who dropped out in Dec., 1943, with a score of 594 and **Five Hundred Club* membership, has now passed the 600 mark.

And †Florence Mack offers this comment: "You say it is not necessary to write out the entire solution. Although I don't agree with you, I will write only the first five or six words of each answer, as you suggest. But there are many cryptograms with sticklers near the ends of the messages."—This statement is true, of course. But any substantial part of a message, correctly transcribed, is practical proof that the solver has "broken the crypt," even though an occasional hard word, not in his dictionary or vocabulary, may remain untranslated. Many readers, however, prefer to send in full solutions.

No. 5233—Cryptic Division. By Ira Pent. Third

Solving Cipher Secrets

subtraction shows values of I and D. Note symbol O in quotient, and Y in 2nd subtraction. The key is numbered: 012 345 678 9.

```
E H I ) O N A S U D ( S U O
        O A H N
          O O A U
          O Y I D
              A H D
              E H I
                I I
```

ANSWERS FOR LAST ISSUE

5211—I'm a cipher fan, also an NDM subscriber! I get my stories and crypts regularly, and don't take chances on getting my copies at the news stands!

5212—The President of the United States receives hundreds of gifts each year from appreciative people, a practice started in Washington's day.

5213—The symbol of the Christmas tree originated in Germany; Santa Claus in Holland; Christmas stockings in Belgium or France; and the greeting, "Merry Christmas!" in England.

5214—Kansas prison inmate secretly swallowed four hundred nails, two safety razors, eleven thumb tacks, two screws, two stove bolts, six washers, plus paper clips, etc. Operation successful!

5215—Maher-shalal-hash-baz, meaning "hasten booty, speed spoil," used in Isaiah, chapter eight, is characterized as the longest word in the Bible!

5216—New bridge deck uses four suit colors: clubs, green, emblem of spring; hearts, red, brightness of summer; diamonds, orange, leaves of autumn; and spades, black, for the darkness of winter.

5217—Western town residents flee flood-shattered wreckage, streaming along narrow dike, seeking higher ground. Buses, cars, trucks pressed into emergency service, evacuate exhausted survivors.

5218—Conversation conservation vote meets veto. As belligerents preserve perverse attitudes, marital life becomes martial. Traps sway as ways part.

5219—Fearless fellow follows furtive fugitive. Finds forgotten forged funds. Fortunately frustrates famous felonious foray. Foiled forger faints.

5220—Penthouse occupant, distraught, swallows lethal dose, slits throat, jumps from thirteenth floor, shoots self during dizzy plunge, crunches into pulp upon curbstone. Dramatic four-way suicide!

5221—Key:

```
0 1 2   3 4 5 6 7 8 9
T R Y   S O L V I N G
```

All answers to current ciphers will be duly credited in our *Cipher Solvers' Club*. Address: M. E. Ohaver, *New Detective Magazine*, Fictioneers, Inc., 205 E. 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y.

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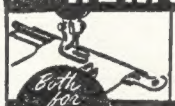

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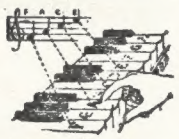

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(Continued from page 72)

"About five grand," I said. "And that's cheap." I nodded toward the gun on the floor. "Ed's probably, and it wasn't the kill gun. But if I should take my theory to the law, they'd work the rest of it out of Gillespie, all right. That Dartanian might not crack, but you picked a lemon in Gillespie, Sam."

Ed said, "We going to listen to this yakety-yak all day, Sam? We going to fool with a punk like him?"

Sam smiled. "Punk? Not Jones, Ed. He's been around a long time, Ed." And to me. "Five grand, Jonesy, and that's the end of it?"

"Five grand is plenty for vacation pay," I said. "I—"

There was a gun in Sam's hand.

His voice was low and easy. "Five grand is cheap, Jones. But I couldn't trust you. I couldn't trust any private gumshoe. And I owe you something from before, you'll maybe remember. Not much, because the guy wasn't much. But he was one of mine, and you sent him up." He nodded to Ed. "Check to see if he was lying about the gun."

Ed came over to run his hands over me. "He sure was, boss. This jerk sure loves to play with fire, doesn't he?"

Sam came over to stand next to me, now. "He does," he said, and slapped me with his left hand. Then he stepped back. "All right, Ed, smack him."

Ed drew his right hand way, way back and from the fruit cellar Chopko said, "That'll be all, boys. Put that gun down, Whitnall."

I was right about Gillespie talking, after he'd had a few rounds with Chopko. And it was the way I'd figured it. Rita Regan got her chance, just the same, and I understand she's quite a hit. I've never seen any of her pictures, so I can't tell you how she is, there. But she makes an awful lot of money, I understand.

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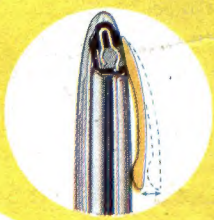

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